

The Blue Thread

NASHRAMH

The Blue Thread

by

Lisa Jean Bothell

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Nashramh: The Blue Thread
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To the memory of Sarah of Vienna
and all of those in long exile
who listen for the soundings of the Shofar.

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LISA JEAN BOTHELL is a native of Seattle, Washington and was born in that city during the summer of 1965. At the time of writing this book she was attending the University of Washington majoring in history. This volume is her second attempt at serious writing and is based on stories related to her by her father.

FOREWORD

My name is Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor, the primary archivist for our Nashramh Sisterhood, and herein I offer you a glimpse of our ancient order through these historic tales about our final coming of age after half a million tumultuous years of unsteady growth.

My earlier tales told of our spreading naval presence on the far-flung primitive rim-worlds of the sixth and seventh spiral arms of our beautiful Starset Galaxy. I spoke of our perplexing mistakes as well as our crowning victories, for none of us can grow without error, nor without critical analysis of our ways. We call ourselves the 'Nashramh' which in our secret language, means 'Women of Compassionate Justice'. This title is both a mission and a goal which we've been chosen to pursue by ancient forces, from the first empyraeum, that occupy our Sacred Stones. As you will learn, many of us forgot our sense of fairness and compassion in the course of extreme events only to be brought back to the path after much terrible soul-searching and self-criticism. We have experienced many things since our early rise to power, and have much to learn before we've truly come of age . . . but herein we made the transition with the destruction of Samael-Borgdragon Estate.

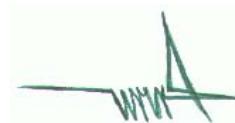
We are not gods, as many primitive peoples mistakenly choose to believe, but mortals who wear our humanity in many ways. We are not the first to travel between the stars, but are one of the oldest continuous organizations of human souls known to do so. Thus, our tales reflect many races, human and others, who seek to defend our Starset Galaxy from invaders whose hidden origins are far out beyond the outer rim. These conquering intruders are known to us as the Legions of Adam Belial and the Sons of Samael.

The Blue Thread

I must direct your attention to a primary focal point of all our tales, and that is 'regeneration-cycles' of human souls into new bodies which we take for granted. That is, 'reincarnation' of human personalities isn't dealt with in mystical terms, but as established and natural fact. Thus Miriam, Jenn, Eaun and others appear again and again throughout the course of our history. Hopefully, you, my dear guest and reader will find the concept both thought-provoking and interesting.

NASHRAMH: The Blue Thread is a continuation of The Red Thread which is the story of Miriam, the elf-girl who reaches the highest order of the Nashramh Sisterhood - the Sister Magum. This volume, The Blue Thread, is the story of Jenn, the child of innocence, who is drawn into the swirling course of events leading to the cataclysmic clash between competing intergalactic forces for the mastery over the Starset Galaxy. The blue thread, who is a man, is brought into focus through the ethereal experience of an ancient awakening that unites the hidden past with the onrushing future. The red thread is a feminine line transcending the course of the story while the blue thread appears only now and again as a stitch in time, in both physical and ethereal forms. It is only through the encounters between these two opposites that the hidden future is revealed against the ebb and flow of cosmic events.

The writing style of this book is so designed as to keep a certain innocence and freshness, while dealing with some weighty matters. Thus, the use of some archaic terms and odd word and sentence constructions is not accidental. You, the reader, will find this to be an unforgettable adventure and a story that you will not only think about, but will reread many times.



Rinim

Chapter 1

Smon

We came from elsewhere, and are preparing to go back where we came from . . . so goes an old adage . . . truly, for we are not alone on Lublinog, nor elsewhere out on the rim . . . for there are other worlds behind ours . . . other lives behind what we call life. . . .

12:00-19 ELIM 6053-7N5

Imol Obok lay exhausted on her hard bed, beads of perspiration pouring from her overheated body. The late afternoon sun beat down on the small rooftop apartment, she and her husband Quoso called home, and the clear sky offered no promise of even a single cloud.

This was the hottest grain season anyone could remember. It was murmured among the faithful that Sweet Sargon had pronounced his divine judgment against the increasing numbers of vile sinners and heretics who hadn't opened their hearts to him, and shirked their holy obligations to his sacred priests.

Imol could feel the steady increase in her heavy rolling contractions now, and knew her time was near. She'd broken water two hours earlier and had been in labor for about half an hour.

She lay on her back, alone in the stifling apartment, with her legs spread and knees thrust into the air. Her man Quoso was at work in the foundry and wouldn't be back for another five hours, so she had to give birth alone. A midwife was out of the question; the price was too high and Quoso needed the money for his stout. No woman was worth giving up his stout for.

Imol shivered with nervous tension. She was a solidly built, though small 14 year-old, with light green skin and dark gold-green hair. She wasn't beautiful, but had fetched a good price when her father sold her to Quoso as a wife. After only two months of marriage, she'd become pregnant, and after the ten-month incubation period, looked forward to presenting her man with a healthy son. Then Sweet Sargon would look favorably upon them.

The contractions became almost continuous. Fearing the pain, Imol pressed down on her swollen belly with both hands, stifling her gasps and cries between clenched teeth.

It happened so quickly she couldn't believe the baby had actually been born so easily. She moved her heavy body tiredly and lifted the small wet baby onto her breasts, holding it close to her. She was almost afraid to look at the tiny figure for fear that it might be a female.

The child did not move. It had a lovely shade of pale green skin, wet with Imol's body fluids and flushed from the hard process of birth. The eyes were closed, so Imol couldn't see if they took after her dark green or Quoso's black. But the baby's appearance didn't interest her at the moment; she only wanted to see what it was.

An agonizing moan escaped Imol's lips as she fought desperately to control her horror. It was a girl-child!

"Oh! Sweet Sargon, what have I done!" she moaned aloud in a panic. "What have I done to deserve this?" She knew Quoso would be disgraced and never forgive her for this vile sin. She felt sick with fear and disappointment.

Carefully, she tugged at the long umbilical cord, dislodging the placenta. Then she tied the cord in a loop near the infant's small belly and cut the external section away with an old kitchen knife, all the while wondering how she could face Quoso when he returned. There would be no help from the minister at Sargon's holy chapel, for she'd sinned and had no excuse to plead. In this, she was alone and guilty.

Imol lay still for a long time, holding the baby, who now breathed regularly after clearing a small bit of mucus from her tiny throat. At first Imol thought the infant was dead; then its raspy breathing began. Imol could hear no other sound but the breathing.

The frail creature lay still, not wriggling or crying as any other newborn baby might have done. When she had been forced into

the sudden chill of the world outside of her mother's body, she nearly deserted her fledgling body because of the terrible shock. There was a chill about her environment that startled her very being - not a chill caused by temperature, for the dry air around her was hot; but another kind of chill: a stifling hostility and fear. Yet an inner imperative forced her to live on.

Now, lying on her mother's warm breast, the newly conscious mind sensed an ominous tension, a strong sensation of not being wanted and that she should have died. Her eyes couldn't open, but an inner sense warned her of the coldness, starkness and hostility of her surroundings, even in the stifling heat that threatened to steal away her very breath. The tension grew until it engulfed the semiconscious mother and her infant child like a dark shadow.

After resting fitfully for three hours, Imol arose and disposed of the afterbirth, then washed the infant's small body with rusty water from the cracked kitchen sink. She had lain on the hard bed for a long time, seriously considering if she should kill the infant before her man came home. But she couldn't bring herself to do it; this was her firstborn and she would not kill the infant girl.

Quoso would be furious and beat her for not producing a boy-child for Sweet Sargon, but Imol would plead for the baby's life. Deep within her mind, she was, for some insane reason, secretly happy that she'd borne this infant girl, although she knew the poor child would have a miserable life, the lot of all women on this world. She'd take care of her firstborn as well as she could, although Quoso would hate her for it.

Imol sighed as she dried her rough hands on the edge of her rumpled skirt, and looked helplessly around the dark, and depressing apartment where she'd spend years caring for this disappointing, although somehow special child. All she could do now was to wait.

Quoso was tall and muscular, with dark green skin, black hair and eyes, and good proportions. He strode briskly through the creaky front door of his apartment. This, he knew, would be the day for his son's birth and his rise to the stature of one of Sweet Sargon's faithful providers.

He saw Imol and her diminished figure, and headed straight for the bedroom to admire his newborn son. "Now," he smiled to himself, "my Sweet Sargon will favor me well."

For Imol, the few short minutes, seemed like hours. She moved quietly into the shadowy room. Quoso just stood there with his mouth hanging open, in a state of shock. Then shaking his head slowly back and forth, he began to cry and then to scream.

"What have you done to me? What have you done to me, you dirty bitch! You filthy rotten bitch! You've defiled my name with my Sweet Sargon! Get that damned thing out of my sight! Get it out!"

Imol, cowering and moving sideways past him, picked up the infant from her bed and left the room, crying. In desperation, she wailed, "Please, Quoso, forgive me. The next two . . . three, will be sons. This one will help take care of them. She'll be their willing servant and work to buy them the good things they deserve. Please forgive me."

Quoso, enraged by a sense of rising despair, turned to Imol and struck her across the face with a resounding blow that caused a dark green welt. Imol nearly dropped the oddly still infant in surprise and pain. Then Quoso, still sobbing, turned and lurched out of the apartment, making directly for the workman's canteen for his soothing mug of stout. He didn't know how he'd justify this vile stain on his manhood with Krosboda, the Lord's humble minister at Sweet Sargon's Chapel of Divine Worship. He'd have to calm himself before appearing for his testimony and confession. He might let this one live, but only because it was a firstborn. Any other females would die.

Imol crouched in the hot, musty apartment, with the infant girl clutched in her arms. The child's eyes had now opened and looking deeply into them, Imol suppressed a growing urge to take its and her own life. Instead, she placed the child in a back closet where Quoso wouldn't have to see it. She'd raise the child out of his sight, lest in a fit of rage he decided to destroy it.

The silent girl grew steadily, although she would never be as strongly built as her mother. Imol was the fourth child in a brood of seven, and the only girl; her father, although defiled by her birth, had been much more lenient about her than Quoso was with his child. She named the girl 'Smon' because she was so quiet and always kept out of the way. Sometimes when Imol looked into the child's shining green eyes, which were oddly old and solemn, she sensed that Smon knew of her precarious hold on life and would do nothing to draw hostile attention. In this respect, Imol was relieved; however there was no guarantee that Quoso wouldn't

have a change of heart and destroy her. Otherwise she took little of Imol's precious time and asked for nothing.

Now after her eight-year fertility cycle, Imol was again pregnant. She prayed constantly to Tiamat to bless her with a male-child, for she knew that if she bore another girl-child, Quoso would kill both her and the infant, and with good reason. He would probably sell Smon to work in the grist pits since she'd be of no use to him. After all, females could bear children only once every eight years, although some were multiple births, like her mother. If two or three birth cycles were wasted on useless girl-children, the husband had every right to destroy his woman, who was as good as sterile.

This pregnancy was harder than the first, and Imol's constitution was failing. She began coughing up bits of dark red blood, but didn't let this stop her from reporting to work each night.

On her job at the metal plug foundry, she was expected to shovel 12 tons of coke on each 12 hour shift. To make things worse, Imol suffered daily abuse from Quoso. He couldn't forgive her great sin of bearing a female as their firstborn. When he'd learned she was again pregnant, he stopped slapping and pushing her around, but still delivered curses and threats about the next child. Eight years of ill-treatment robbed Imol of every shred of attractiveness she'd ever possessed, and her eyes always darted fitfully around the apartment and foundry, as if she expected to be attacked.

Quoso and Imol didn't make much money at the foundry, so Smon was put to work at age five. She spent her days foraging for green plants for the family diet and scrounging the city dump for saleable metals and other valuables, as all young girls were expected to do. On her fifth birthday, which only her mother remembered, Imol told Smon what she was to do, and set a quota of greens to be gathered each day. For the last three years, the child never failed her quota and Quoso was satisfied with his enriched diet.

Smon was also adept at finding pieces of precious metal and sometimes usable cloth at the dump, and she dutifully brought it home to her mother, thus adding a tiny share to the family's meager income.

As Imol neared her time, Smon spent longer hours cleaning the apartment and cooking their meals, so Imol could gain much needed rest. When they were alone together, Smon massaged her mother's tired muscles and combed her long gold-green hair while humming soft little tunes that Imol had never heard before.

On the 15th day of Nostal, Imol bore her second child. This time Quoso was there. Smon boiled water and helped her mother as midwife when the girl-child was born. After the umbilical cord was cut she washed the small, mewling infant with cloth rags, then disposed of the afterbirth.

The infant was lying next to her mother, when Quoso entered, his black eyes narrowed in tense anticipation. He'd gone to the canteen for a mug of soothing stout and was surprised to find the birth had already occurred.

Quoso saw his woman lying still on the bed, her eyes staring blankly at the cracked ceiling - in a state of shock. She lay there without moving, just staring at the ceiling. Quoso was a little unnerved.

Slowly he moved to her side, noting the tautness of her features. Then he bent over and uncovered the infant. It was a girl.

Without a word, Quoso picked up the sleeping infant, and holding it by its tiny feet, dashed it against the stuccoed wall. Upside down for a brief second, the baby opened its eyes and let loose a wail of discomfort, then struck the wall with a loud THOONKK!

Quoso dropped the lifeless body, turned on his heel and left for the canteen. Imol remained completely still on the bed. If not for her labored breathing, Smon would have thought she was dead.

Smon had seen all. As she sat huddled in the darkened corner of Imol's room, the sound of the baby striking the wall kept echoing through her stunned mind. With a silent whimper she pressed her hands over her ears and closed her eyes, trying desperately to pretend it hadn't happened. For over an hour, as the darkness of night consumed the room, and the temperature dropped to below freezing, she sat with her eyes closed, rocking back and forth in dry, tearless sobs.

After a long time, Smon slowly opened her eyes. A soft light shining through the room's only window dimly outlined her gentle mother who remained still on the bed, staring at the ceiling. The

infant's lifeless body lay where it had landed. There was no sound in the dark apartment other than Imol's labored, raspy breathing.

Smon slowly uncurled and stood up shakily, moving haltingly to her mother. She turned to a low counter and pulled out a patched blanket and placed it over Imol, then stroked her pale brow until the woman's tense body jerked into relaxation and the staring eyes closed in a restless sleep.

Smon bent over the dead infant and wrapped it in tattered swaddling clothes. Without a sound, she carried her baby sister down the five flights of crooked, uneven stairs to the street, then to a derelict grove near the city dump. With a piece of broken wood, Smon dug a shallow grave, into which she placed the lifeless little bundle before bowing her head in a silent prayer.

Smon filled the grave and placed seven large chunks of broken concrete on the mound. Then, shivering in the icy cold, she quickly returned home, avoiding Quoso, who came in drunk from his stout. Before this night, Smon disliked and feared her cruel father. Now she came very close to hating him.

As Imol's health deteriorated, she was forced to work longer hours to shovel her 12 tons of coke. Three months later, she died with her shovel in her hand.

Quoso lost interest in her when she'd borne a second girl, and wouldn't even talk to her. When she died, he refused to claim her body, so it was sent to the local charnel house for disposal. He had already bought another young woman for his wife and moved her into the apartment two days after Imol died. His new wife was only thirteen and small for her age. Her name was Kusoni.

She was a gentle girl who wanted to be friends with Smon. The two worked together to run the household and to keep Quoso fed properly.

One morning, Quoso spied Smon coming out of her back closet and motioned her over to him with a grunt. She moved hesitantly, and when she was close enough he reached out and grabbed her roughly to him. His coarse hands pawed at her shivering body as he examined her for pubic hair.

"You'll soon be ready for breeding," he muttered, then let her go. That morning, Smon left to forage for greens. She never returned to the small, dank apartment again.

Smon found an empty room next to a burned out building and made it her home. She was careful never to be seen entering or leaving the premises, and took great pains to cover her tracks.

Smon was now 12 years old, and had survived the last four years virtually unnoticed. Her slight figure could easily be taken for a younger child. Now she'd reached puberty and was experiencing her first season in heat. She knew her sexual odors would attract the unwanted attention of passing males.

Smon knew she was unprotected and vulnerable. She scoured the city dump daily for precious metal to make weapons for her defense. One piece she found was a short, flat plate with a centimeter-long nail sticking out of it. Smon filed the iron nail razor-sharp, then, covered it with a piece of glazing putty. She strapped the flat plate to her left leg just above her knee, out of sight beneath her baggy workpants.

The second weapon was another long razor-sharp nail embedded in a hard wooden handle. She kept this dagger tucked into her belt.

Smon remained constantly alert for escape routes from the leering beasts who watched her on the open streets. Her chastity didn't worry her - her life did. An unprotected girl usually wound up dead after she'd been raped, since she was considered to be soiled. Sometimes the attacker just got carried away. Surviving as an unprotected female was difficult enough, being in heat made it nearly impossible.

While foraging for greens she'd found countless corpses of young girls who'd been raped and killed. Their violated frail bodies were left unclaimed in alleys or at the city dump. Nobody cared a great deal. Females were of little value to Sweet Sargon's faithful.

Wog Bago noticed the young bitch in heat as she tried to blend with the evening shadows. She might be an interesting catch. He walked quickly after her, taking long, confident strides, his male organs swelling as his nostrils drank in the musky scent she emitted. As the girl cut to the left, he blocked her passage. She quickly turned and fled into a cluttered alley.

Wog moved in for the kill, finding her cowering next to a barrier wall midway up the dark alley.

"Now, my hot little animal, we're going to try you on for size," he laughed, reaching out for the frightened child.

Without warning, she twisted in his grasp, her skinny knee thrusting up into his swollen male organ. Something sharp and burning pierced the sensitive tissue, sending a shock beyond any description surging through his sweaty loins.

Wog instinctively let go of the writhing figure and with a sharp cry started to double up while grabbing at his escaping prey. Before he could resecure his grip, she slipped loose. She spun deftly around and leapt up on his sloped back, and using her pointed dagger with all the force she could muster, pierced his thick hide and thrust the sharpened nail deep down between his cervical vertebrae and into his spinal cord.

Wog lay panting on the cold, damp soil of the dark alley, paralyzed from the neck down. He dimly heard the sound of running feet, then nothing. Wog lay there completely immobile for five hours before drawing his last breath.

Smon moved quickly, stabbing as hard as she could and escaping before her wounded attacker could follow. She didn't think she'd hurt him that badly, so she ran as fast as she could while keeping in the shadows.

Two days later, Smon heard the butcher, Wog Bago, had been killed on his way to the workmen's' canteen. Nothing more came of the incident. Wog was replaced at the shop without being missed.

Smon found it harder to remain inconspicuous. She was rapidly becoming a young woman. She was 13 years-old and had killed six attackers since Wog Bago. So many killed in the same manner had alerted Sweet Sargon's police. An unauthorized killer was on the loose, and they now took greater interest in this rundown industrial neighborhood bordering the old spaceport.

As if predatory males and police weren't enough, Smon was avoiding Sargon's work levies. All men and women over 12 were required by law to work in Sargon's benevolent state industries; there were no exceptions. If she registered for work, Smon knew she'd be sold to a man for breeding. She had to avoid this at all costs. Imol's sad fate never escaped her memory and the likes of the crude and cruel Quoso filled her with dread.

Yobok Dimako investigated a number of thefts from the metal plug foundry next to the old spaceport, and had several suspects under surveillance. He was considering whether to arrest them immediately or to shake them down until it was no longer

profitable. Nodding his head, he decided to wait and see how his prospects developed.

He'd also noticed the young tart foraging for food in the old trade concession, and wondered if she was registered for the work levy. Following this one was a difficult task. She knew all the tricks of evasion. Soon he realized she was definitely different from the other cowardly females in the neighborhood. There was a good price paid for this kind of woman by the black market.

It took nearly a week for Yobok to find her hidden lair next to a burned-out building. Now it was a simple problem to catch her alive; he knew from experience that this sort of woman would take her own life before being captured by the authorities, especially if she had no chance for escape.

He waited in a building near her lair until she left to forage for food. Then, covering his tracks carefully, he entered the dark room. The girl had cleverly set up remote signals to warn her if anyone entered her lair. Yobok marveled at their simple effectiveness, and reset the ones he'd inadvertently tripped. Now all he had to do was to wait.

After foraging for breakfast, Smon returned home with a few tasty bulbs and grease nuts. The morning air was cool and a light breeze swept across the old spaceport, bringing softly refreshing odors of dry grasses and plants growing there. Carefully approaching her secret room, she stopped and looked around with a subtle apprehension, known only to the hunted, that someone or something was stalking her. She'd felt this sensation several times this week, and was nervous. Maybe she'd stake out another area to live in.

Outside her room, Smon carefully checked her alarm system. It was intact. She ducked around the broken concrete slab that hid her door and slipped silently into her darkened room. Standing up, she saw the movement too late, and the jolt from Yobok's suspensor whip knocked her unconscious.

Yobok stood over the prostrate form and considered whether or not to try her out. He decided against it; she would fetch a far better price in one piece. He bent down and stuffed the limp body into a burlap sack he'd brought with him. Hoisting the sack over his shoulder, Yobok made for the black market's reception center, next to Sweet Sargon's customs and trade complex.

Smon awoke with a start, lying stiffly on a hard, cool floor that seemed as smooth as glass. Opening her eyes, she fought off a surge of nausea and dizziness and tried to focus her vision. Her watery eyes slowly cleared and she found herself alone in a large, empty, sterile-looking room. She was completely naked and disarmed.

Smon tried to sit up, but her head reeled and a dull throbbing pain confused her senses. She had no idea where she was or how she had come to be here. Smon tried to think things out and to remember just what happened. The mysterious person in her secret room, obviously hadn't raped or otherwise hurt her. Except for her headache, she felt physically sound.

To her left, a door slid open, and a tall woman dressed in strange green clothing strode in. The door closed behind her automatically, which Smon found fascinating.

She watched carefully as the woman walked slowly toward her and noticed the neuronic whip in her right hand. She had never heard of Sweet Sargon having police women and was both confused and mystified.

"Stand up, young woman," the stranger ordered.

Smon did as she was told, feeling vulnerable and alone. She kept her eye on the malevolent-looking whip.

"What is your name, young woman?"

Smon didn't respond, unsure whether she should lie or not. Without warning, the meter-long whip slashed across her right thigh, sending a terrible burning jolt through her entire leg and side. Smon doubled up in pain and tried to move away from her antagonist, who remained in a fighting stance. This was certainly no overheated male who could be brought down with a small dagger.

"Now what is your name, young woman?" repeated the stranger in an even tone.

"Smon . . . Smon Obok."

"An interesting name," the woman replied. "It means you're a quiet one, and in your case it appears to be more than a name. It seems to be more a title. How interesting," The woman paused, blinking her light blue eyes and looked directly at Smon. "Now it's time to test you and find out who you really are. Stand at attention."

Smon immediately stood upright and looked straight ahead without thinking, and the tall woman walked slowly around her, the lighted whip swinging lightly in her right hand.

Again, without warning, the whip struck her other hip from behind. Smon doubled up, and silently clenched her teeth in pain.

"I said stand at attention!" The voice commanded.

Smon struggled to obey, her body shaking with both pain and stress.

"So. You do have more to you than the rest. It appears you have some degree of self-discipline," murmured the woman. She smiled inwardly to herself. "I'm going to leave this room for awhile and I want you to remain at attention until after I return." Then she turned and left.

Smon stood alone in the middle of the chilly room, awaiting the strange woman's return. She had no idea where she was, or why. One thing was certain; it would not be easy to escape, especially past that woman. She was a tough one.

Smon remained completely calm. Without moving her head, she carefully investigated the wall in front of her. She saw a little rod pointing straight at her, and knew it was a weapon.

After several minutes, the door opened behind her and the strange woman returned. She walked slowly around her, swinging the unlit whip from left to right. After circling Smon several times, the woman stopped behind her and Smon heard her light the whip with a soft snap.

Smon swung around deftly, thrusting the heel of her left foot directly into the woman's solar plexus and jabbing her sharp knuckles deep into the exposed throat. As the woman doubled up, she spun sideways, kicking out at Smon and catching her solidly on the hip. The girl was thrown across the room by the force of the kick, and rolled, landing on her feet.

Smon started for the doubled-up figure on the floor with only escape or death on her mind - then the wall-mounted stun blaster got her.

Smon awoke slowly. Bright lights shone above her and she felt firm bindings holding her body and limbs securely against a hard surface. Standing above her was another woman dressed in the same strange green clothes as the first one.

"My, now, aren't we a tough one," said the woman without a smile. "I think you're a lot more than you appear to be. Tell me, Smon, where did you learn to fight like that?"

Smon replied carefully. "I learned it in the streets, while watching the boys fighting."

"No, no my dear, you didn't learn that technique from the boys. I've watched video replays of your attack on Sister Ivel quite a few times, and it has a sisterhood signature to it."

The woman studied Smon for a long time, nodding her head as if agreeing with someone else's opinion. "Could it be that your name is really Pivar Ak?"

"No. My name is Smon Obok."

The tall woman studied her more closely, saying, "My name is Sister-Magum Estol Surbin, and now if you will tell me your last name, I will tell you your first name. Is that fair?"

Smon looked intently at this woman, whose face looked hard and callous, but whose eyes held a deep softness. Suddenly something came to her.

"My last name is B'Mesziah."

The older woman smiled. "And your first name is Miriam. We didn't know you'd made it here to Lublinog, since no bill of lading was ever found relating to your shipping crate."

Smon frowned. Yes, something was coming to mind, the sisterhood, and . . . a fire.

"Now, Miriam, there is one more question I must ask you, and please answer it for me. Who is of the Sacred Stone whom you have seen with your own eyes?"

"Ruby."

Sister-Magum Estol Surbin began unstrapping Smon from the table. "Sister Ivel, whom you attacked, is still alive, although she'll be some time recovering. Why did you attack her, especially since you knew a blaster was trained on you? We saw your eyes looking at it."

"I wanted you to kill me," Smon said slowly. "I could see no way to escape from here and I thought you were the police from Sweet Sargon's Temple of Love."

"I see," Estol murmured. "Then what I must do next may not shock you. In fact, it may be what you really want."

"What do you mean?" Smon asked her heart pounding.

"I must kill you," Estol said flatly, looking at the young girl sadly.

Smon looked at the tall Sister-Magum for a long moment, then replied, "do what you have to, I will not resist."

Estol's face burst into a sunny smile. "My dear child, you don't have to worry about dying. I know you're miserable in the body you have, although you've made the best of it you could under the circumstances. But our reason for removing you from the body is so we can send you to Ruby - and you know why this must be done."

"Yes I do," said Smon, now remembering her last conversation with Ruby. Memories began to flood into her conscious mind when she first remembered her true name. Now she knew Ruby was not God, but that she was compassionate and just, and would do nothing unfair and not in Smon's - no, Miriam's - best interests.

"When do we get on with it?" she asked.

"Right now," replied Sister Estol, taking her hand and leading her into a short white hallway. At the end of the hall was a room furnished with only a single couch.

"Please lie down on the couch, Smon. This will take only a few moments."

Smon lay down on the soft couch, thinking about how good the comfort felt after so long a time of struggling to just survive. Estol stood next to her, holding her right hand.

Another woman silently entered and taped a tiny crystal chip to Smon's front tooth. Then she placed an injector gun next to the girl's jugular and inserted a narco-poison.

Estol Surbin gently rubbed the small, green hand, while quietly saying "Hear O'Daughters of Compassionate Wisdom, the Eternal our Creator, the Eternal is one."

The crystal chip, which had now taken on a soft glow, was removed and placed in a special courier's pouch for immediate shipment. The limp, green body of Smon Obok was taken to the facility's disintegrator and atomized.

Chapter 2

Dreams

In the abstract dimension of Yetzirah . . . or the mind . . . there is no time or space . . . knowledge is absolute, and past, present, and future blend together into eternity.

02:00-15 SHABIN 6110-7N5

"Please, let me hold her. Just for a minute," pleaded the woman's voice.

"You really shouldn't. Please remember what we said at the briefing . . . you'll become attached to her and won't want to give her up." Then, more softly, "and remember, she's fully aware."

"I know. That's why I have to hold her. I want her to know I bore her as an act of love, not necessity. This is important to me, more important than anything else in this universe."

The other voice hesitated, with slow measured breaths then reluctantly agreed, "all right. But please, not too long."

"Thank you, thank you," the woman's soft voice trailed off. She smiled gently as she wrapped her arms around the tiny infant girl and cuddled her close to her bosom.

"Oh! Isn't she beautiful? Oh, my little one, I know you're special, and I know you can understand what I'm saying. I'm your natural mother and you were conceived because your father and I love one another. And we both love you very much. You are so very special, and we're letting you go only because we understand just why you're so special, and we love you for it."

The woman looked up, tears shining in her eyes, and then her gaze fell on her husband. "Can, Lica . . ."

"Please, no names."

She nodded. "Can he hold her, just for a moment?"

Her husband implored the doctor with pleading eyes, "Yes, but please, no names."

Strong, yet gentle hands gingerly took the infant from her mother, and the man smiled affectionately.

"Oh, my God, isn't she beautiful? I just want you to feel me, little one. Your mother has spoken for both of us. We both love you as much as we love each other."

Smiling broadly, his brilliant face expressed his love, as he gently rocked his infant daughter. "May you have a good, full, and happy life," he whispered into her ear.

He looked up reluctantly, with tears of happiness in his eyes, "Thank you, doctor, for letting us speak to her. She can't know our names, but perhaps someday she will recognize us despite that, because of the love we bear for her. . . ."

"She will be in good and loving hands, and that's one thing you can be sure of. Now, we must take her to her new home."

The doctor's kindly eyes twinkled as she rose and gently took the baby from the man's arms. But first he bent over and kissed his child gently on her forehead, marveling at her beautiful little body and face. He had been proud when the doctor pronounced her a healthy daughter, and shown him and his wife the infant's ten tiny fingers and toes.

Wrapping the baby in a soft blanket and pulling a hood over the infant's vulnerable little head, the doctor smiled and said, "May peace be with you." Then she turned and was gone.

The young couple watched the doctor as she left. Then the man carefully moved his wife in front of the room's main window and cradled her in his arms. Both waved to their departing baby as the transport car sped off, although they knew she couldn't see them. Then they turned away, feeling sad, empty and let down. Yet they were incredibly happy to have offered their infant girl a new life, and to have held her.

Inside the warm apartment, the man helped his wife back to her bedroom to rest from her ordeal; outside, the crimson autumn leaves blew briskly along the ground in concert with cold gusts of wind. Both knew they'd helped bring a special sister of the Nashramh into life and they knew they'd made the right decision.

Miriam lay on her back, her body exhausted from the trauma of birth. She thought about the voices she'd heard, and knew she would always be able to recognize her parents from the love and warmth they'd radiated, despite the trouble the sisterhood went through to hide their identities from her. She understood the loving words the two warm people had spoken to her, and although her heart nearly burst with joy at feeling their loving touch and at the prospect of the newness of her life ahead, her brain was still too small and undeveloped for her to consciously respond.

It seemed as though she was still in an ethereal state where memories and sensations dominated everything. She could watch, or in this case hear and feel, but could do nothing. Within the substance of her newly formed brain, she was fully aware of what was happening to her and around her, and she knew, that she was now with her real family, the Nashramh Sisterhood. Now she felt intense joy at being among friends after such a long time in exile, but had no way to express it.

Miriam tried her best to smile but couldn't, so to comfort herself, she smiled to herself within her imagination. She was so happy that she'd been able to feel the life forces of her natural mother and father, and not just hear their words as was required by the normally strict policy of the Nashramh's Gamma Restart Group. She, too, loved them in a way they would never know, for she was truly a part of them and their love for each other. It felt so good to be wanted and loved, for she remembered her experiences as Smon all too well. Unbidden, a fleeting memory of poetic words she'd once heard, coursed through her mind:

'Over the marriage bed hovers the Eternal's glory. . . .'

Miriam had many things she wanted to think about, but because she was physically only a tiny baby, her body tired long before her thoughts could fully develop. As she reflected on the warmth and happiness of being home and safe again, she drifted off into a deep sleep.

As the days passed by, and Miriam's eyes finally cleared, she could see her surroundings clearly and the people who bustled over her. Kindly nurses bathed and fed her, changed her diapers, and spent many hours holding her while singing happy little songs to her. It was obvious they loved their duties in the sisterhood nursery, and Miriam found that when she tried to smile and show

them that she, too, was happy, her facial muscles just weren't coordinated yet. It was almost unbearable to feel so much joy and be unable to express it.

And then there were the dreams that weren't really dreams. During her first days of conscious life, Miriam spent most of her time floating between pleasant sensations of temporal reality and the dream-like state of the ethereal, spending most of her time in the latter. She had vivid memories of Borgdragon at this time, and of Alsis Jeffnel, the one person she could never forget; a woman who was so frightened and yet so incredibly brave. Alsis, whom she had never really met, would always be with her, almost a part of her. Even in her infancy, Miriam knew, she needed the memory of Alsis to complete some hidden balance within her. Inwardly she wondered what it was.

- Yes Alsis . . . courage does have many faces -

Then there were other dreams, beyond the strong memories that dominated her nights, which became clear only in her mind's eye. These were different kinds of memories, memories of things that existed outside of temporal space and time. She could see her core ethereal face . . . not as a single face, but as two superimposed with a dimension that was different from all other Magums.

Then there was Ruby, whom Miriam had thought about ever since she found herself in temporal exile, back at Three-Stones Academy. She missed Ruby more than she'd realized, and it was good to see her familiar face again. It was almost as if she was once again looking into the shimmering blue mirror back at Borgdragon.

Miriam asked her friend and teacher about her own strange appearance. Ruby answered with a voice that was both a whisper of sound and a shade of color, saying, "Look closely into the mirror of your soul and as you do so, describe to me what you see, my child of grace."

Miriam spent a long time studying her reflection, which alternated and changed rhythmically. After what seemed an eternity, she could make out the features of a man's face with light blue skin and even, regular, and strong features. His eyes were deep and sensitive, and in an odd way, sad.

Miriam described her vision to Ruby, who smiled and replied, "You see a reflection of yourself who was part of you when first we met long ago at Borgdragon. You are Raphael B'Thebel, trusted courier and special agent of our Nashramh Sisterhood. You were killed by radiation from a sanitation craft, while preparing to leave a cave in the cliffs, north of Borgdragon's wall. The radiation turned your hair from a deep blue to a golden yellow, which shone as a crown of light around your long-deserted skull."

Ruby nodded her head as if she'd remembered some secret thing, then, continued. "You waited five years before you found and entered a body, through which you could complete your sworn mission. The child's body had nearly died from trauma and the young intellect who'd occupied it was in shock when you entered. It was you who forced the wounded and traumatized body to climb up the vile Borgdragon wall and to enter our hidden sanctuary. It was you and each of your other faces who emerged at certain points in your course through temporal reality to control the situation.

"Now, Miriam, look at your image again, but more deeply."

Miriam looked at the attractive face of Raphael and continued to study it; she felt an odd comfort in the very nature of the man who looked back at her.

After a long time, her gaze passed through the thin veneer of his features, and slowly focused on the ancient face of an old, old woman. Her features were so encrusted with age that they resembled those of a long dead mummy, and had no distinguishing characteristics except for a thin line that was her mouth and a small protrusion that was her nose. Her eyes were the only things that seemed alive; they were a deep sparkling black, and very sad. Looking into them, Miriam saw eternity without end, and felt herself being pulled down - drowning - in waves of loneliness and emptiness. An icy realization gripped her: how deep and frightening eternity is and how lonely is the abyss of infinity which seems to swallow up the small sparks of all that exists.

From somewhere deep within the thin, dry, wrinkled mouth of this fragile and ancient face, came a sweet, tinkling voice of a little girl. The sad and slow words had a slight lisp to them.

"I have failed in my sacred trust, and now I have been given another chance through the life of you and our new spirit, that of the baby whose body has joined us together. You, Raphael, and I,

Miriam, are the first binary of our existence, and through the binding life of this baby, we are joined together as two through her innocent life."

The voice paused for a second that seemed to last ages, and those deep, drowning eyes seemed to glow.

"You see, Raphael, we have become, in essence, this elf child. We are no longer our previous selves, but instead are a part of her young, inexperienced soul. Together, we will traverse the paths of eternity as a candle of flickering light - Yes, and a singular one at that."

Miriam studied the old and withered face. A jumble of strong feelings came over her - sadness, fear, and a haunting sense of loneliness. And there was a strong feeling of regret for someone or something lost. Then the old woman's face slowly rippled and faded as shadowy outlines of another face began to superimpose and blend itself onto it.

Slowly, the face of an elf child came into a blurry focus, and hers were also the eyes of eternity, and more. She smiled softly, appearing as a shimmering vision seen as though reflected in a crystal glass.

Her eyes were as deep and lonely as those of the ancient woman, yet they held something more which was hauntingly familiar.

On and on, Miriam traversed Ruby's ethereal domain and saw realities within her self that made her a Magum. During her first three years, Miriam mostly experienced recurring memories of her time with Ruby before she'd been born into this elfin body. In a way, these dreams were memories of that interim period between her incarnate bodies and now existing events. She had difficulty in differentiating between the two, although this didn't really matter since whichever reality she experienced made her feel at home.

Miriam's waking hours were also full. Daily the nurses fed and bathed her, chatting happily to her all the while, and as she became stronger, they helped her to learn to walk. Her nursery was cozy and furnished with cheery yellow and white patterns and filled with all sorts of bright colored objects, some of which were children's toys while others weren't. When Miriam was alone and could crawl and toddle about, she would play with the computer keys set in a low table and watch the results on a color video

screen. She giggled when she pictured herself sitting in diapers and operating a computer terminal. What must she look like?

Miriam found that she still remembered the basics of these computers, but her infant's brain wasn't developed enough to accommodate a real workload. So she used the computer as a toy with which to learn and test herself.

As the days and weeks passed and her daily routine became established, Miriam began to really enjoy being a little baby and playing with the children's toys set about and using her uncluttered imagination. Remembering her past experiences often made her weary, and in many ways saddened her, even though she had the future to look forward to. She came to realize that her future and past would always be intertwined, and being reborn in a new body as a child was only a brief respite from the toils and responsibilities of being a Magum. She thoroughly enjoyed the time she had to be a child, with few worries to distract her and remind her of the war-torn galaxy.

The only toys Miriam didn't like were the extremely lifelike puppets and dolls, although rag dolls didn't bother her and she named one 'Kirra' to keep her nurses happy. She knew that sometimes spirits of the black one's agents, who were disincarnate, and other sylph-types, were capable of entering the bodily forms of these lifelike toys for observational purposes. She didn't like the idea of being watched by these unknown observers whether they were innocent or not. Only once did this occur; one night shortly after she arrived, she became aware that there was something more to the eyes of one of her puppets than just glass. There was definitely another person looking out of it. Miriam had no doubts that the personality was harmless, but as soon as she could make herself understood, she had the nurses remove the toy.

Miriam also found that she really liked all the attention she got from the nurses, who loved to bounce her up and down and tell her what a pretty little girl she was. Ruby had once told her that if it weren't for the luxury of dying and being able to be reborn as an infant, life would soon lose all of its newness and become intolerable. Yet, in some ways, she felt everything went so slowly because of her infancy and she was wasting precious time. She mentioned this concern to Ruby.

"Be a baby. Enjoy playing and imagining childish things for as long as you can," Ruby replied. "It is only once in every millennium

that one has the luxury of a decent childhood, if even that often. And Miriam, I can never again have that luxury, and I wish I could. So enjoy your childhood and make the most of it."

Miriam, remembering her time as Smon, and earlier at Borgdragon, understood the truth and wisdom of this advice and took full advantage of it.

Miriam's days were full, and she was busy all the time with joyful events. She loved playing with her toys, taking naps, and being with other children her own age, while receiving so much attention. It seemed as if every day was a holiday for her.

Her nights, too, were not devoid of activity, and as time went on, she seemed to be 'awake' all night long although she slept. Her mind was not as yet cluttered with temporal matters, and she could investigate and become familiar with her ten components.

Chapter 3

Magum

Sleep, it is said is a hint of death . . . and dreams, therein, are a hint of something more. . . .

Miriam came to learn much about her Magum personality while traversing that space between sleep and dreams. . . .

26:00-10 NASHIM 6114-7N5

Miriam's first really vivid encounters with her other component personalities began when she was three and a half years old. One evening after she'd fallen asleep, she experienced an odd dream about flying around the top of an ornate, orange-latticed building in what might have been a familiar setting, but wasn't. Wriggling in the dream, she spoke aloud in her sleep.

"Who are you? What are you doing?"

Suddenly the vision blinked, as if someone's eye had shut, then opened again. Then a strangely beautiful face of a woman with pale skin, black eyes, and white hair, slowly formed before her mind's eye. A hauntingly soft voice replied, "My name is Telenji B'Seraph. Don't you remember me? We joined together at Borgdragon and again in Ruby's domain. Come now, my lovely elf," and the voice tinkled with happy laughter, "look at me. I am the teller of tales and the spinner of dreams. Once you read my poems when you were a librarian at Three-Stones Academy. Don't you remember?"

Miriam's mind reeled for a moment. From somewhere deep within, a flood of memories surfaced in a rush. After the initial shock of surprise, an overwhelming sense of happiness engulfed her as she realized that from this moment on she would be able to

remember and experience all ten of her inner selves. Beforehand, she'd only remembered Raphael and the ancient Miriam.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "My beautiful Telenji, I do know you. Oh! May our Creator be truly blessed with my gratitude! Now I am finally complete again."

Miriam was a Magum again once she'd returned to Ruby's domain from her exile at Lublinog, but only now could her child's brain remember and distinguish her ten parts. An incredible happiness welled up in her as she realized she could communicate with Telenji and the others.

The two talked on throughout the night, and when Miriam awoke, she vividly remembered everything. She was now truly a Sister-Magum again, no longer alone.

Each night thereafter, Miriam began to investigate herself and to weave the fabric of the lasting relationships that were to sustain her throughout eternity. She met Tengi, who was also a Seraphim like Telenji. Both were almost ghostlike in appearance because of their lightness in density, although Miriam knew from earlier studies that in temporal reality, they were completely tangible. Only her ethereal vision made them seem so ghostly.

She also learned that they didn't actually fly around as birds do, but swam in some of the heavier atmospheres they encountered. It was Telenji's memory of swimming atop a high building that first attracted Miriam's attention to her. Miriam found, with an onslaught of sad and terrible memories, that the two were enslaved by Samael's black legions, and upon arriving at Borgdragon, both were banded with heavy metal straps to keep them from swimming away. These straps remained inside Borgdragon's wall until it was atomized in the catastrophic explosion of the Nashramh's making. Tengi's soft, haunting voice, took on a sad note that nearly broke Miriam's heart when she remembered it.

"It was horrible to be so banded . . . I felt as though my very skin would smother and I had difficulty breathing and moving. When some of us visit worlds with heavy atmospheres and aren't supposed to swim in them, we usually wear heavy boots so we don't find ourselves floating. But these straps felt as if they were living parasites that sucked the life out of me while I toiled for the black ones . . . in 100 years I aged from 122 to nearly 800 years, in a physical sense."

Telenji agreed as Miriam felt their sad memories flow over her.

Both Telenji and Tengi found sharing corporeal experience with Miriam gratifying, partially because Raphael was an integral part of her personality. Something about his presence made a real difference for both the Seraphim and the other women. He filled a need that warded off loneliness and brought about a healthy balance between male and female personalities, in some ways like that between a particularly close brother and sister.

Raphael, according to Tengi, was a real man. He was gentle without being effeminate and strong without being overbearing. When it really came to a pinch, it was he who knew when and how to fight, and when to run.

Two nights after meeting Telenji, another of Miriam's integral components introduced herself. ChiMon of the Chasmalim appeared to Miriam as potato-like with brown, knobby skin and small, faded brown eyes. She was a biochemical systems research analyst and had also been an excellent medical doctor in times past.

ChiMon was a most singular soul; she seldom spoke, usually humming softly in agreement to what the others said. Yet for all of her oddities in both appearance and mannerisms, she was the best-read of all and surpassed them with her working knowledge of temporal creation. Miriam concluded that ChiMon was probably the eldest and most experienced of her components. When ChiMon did speak, and this was rarely, she was hesitant. She frequently interrupted herself for long passages of time to recheck the accuracy of her words. She abhorred the idea of misleading anyone with any kind of wrong information, especially about causative reality.

"The sands of temporal time," she would often say, in many and various ways, "are fraught with contradictions. For just as sand is made up of individual particles, so is the entirety of linear time. Temporal time is a series of incidents which are forever embedded in the fabric of our physical universe once they have occurred, but all have gaps between them. Thus, other occurrences emanating from the ethereal, are thrust among them, and while not changing their reality, do change their flavor. One must be careful in how she conducts herself within the causative arena of time and space."

Miriam never quite understood what ChiMon meant, but something told her it was an essential truth that must eventually

be addressed and grasped before one could grow through experiences in the causative reality of temporal time and space.

Miriam also discovered Olimine and Salphine, from the Chajothim Proctorate. These lovely women had known each other long before arriving separately at Borgdragon Estate, and both were uniquely beautiful for their race. Their original bodies were bony and shallow in appearance, and their eyes were shaped like many-faceted sapphires, which glowed with an inner light and beguiled the mind.

Both women were musicians, understanding instruments from more than a thousand worlds. Although their voices weren't considered exceptional, they knew the lyrics and melodies of countless songs from throughout the inhabited galaxy in many languages. Their combined memories had offered Miriam songs to sing in the past, along with the large selection Ruby taught her at Borgdragon.

Miriam never tired of their conversations and frequent recourse to lyrical melodies. She often felt nostalgia from deep-rooted memories of her own world of origin, Mesziah, which was just as peaceful and innocent in character as these two lovely women seemed to be. Most interesting were the sisters' vivid memories which seemed so clear and fair to her that she felt she'd experienced them herself. On the night she met Salphine, she first had an oddly vivid dream.

It seemed like a real event. She was gliding slowly and gracefully down a long hall, carrying a light-weight harp with strings of spun silver. The huge hallway was lined by large grey stones and the fine architectural trimmings of Chajoth country manors. She glided with a quickening pace down the long, cool hallway towards a reception room. She could see the flickering flames from a mammoth fireplace within, and warmth kindled deep inside her.

As she came to the door, she hugged her instrument close, feeling her heart beating faster than usual. She felt a rush of warmth and happiness; she was finally home.

Salphine reached the half-open door, and feeling the heat from the huge fireplace within, gently pushed it open as she stepped through. It was the main entertainment room of a high counselor of Chajoth's regional government. She had been invited to perform for his guests.

More than a dozen people sat on long, low couches around the room. All were in finery, the fair women wrapped in loosely fitting silken gowns bedecked with fine, glittering jewels. Almost immediately, a sensitive song came to Salphine's mind.

A low satin-cushioned couch sat at an angle to the huge stone fireplace. She settled herself on it. Without any introduction, she began to strum her silver harp and softly sing a sensitive melody. The silver strings made delicate, plucking sounds like those of tiny morning birds, and her breathy voice sounded like a light summer breeze; together they sounded like tiny glass and crystal chimes blown in the wind.

At first unnoticed, Salphine soon had all heads turned in her direction. When she'd finished, she saw their warm and contented smiles, an ample reward for her efforts. Ah, it felt so good to be home among civilized people again after such a long time in exile.

Salphine gracefully scanned the room, still gently plucking her harp, looking for Counselor Selomine; she saw his face light up with a warm smile as he recognized her. Her heart swelled with love and joy as she looked deeply into his glowing sapphire eyes, which became as one with the dancing flames of the great fire. . . .

Miriam twisted in her strange, yet comfortable dream and something inside her awakened. Throughout the dream, which slowly faded, a strangely musical and breezy voice spoke to her.

"Ah, now you have seen Kerrell, my love."

Miriam took notice of the blonde woman's delicate face that slowly crystallized before her mind's eye, startled by the intensity of the happy, peaceful, and loving emotions she'd just experienced in her dream-memory; to leave it almost broke her heart. And she remembered Kerrell with the same love and warmth as she did Ben Condon!

That night, Salphine introduced herself. The following evening, her companion Olimine introduced herself, first with a short memory of her own lovely daughter, who was now among the Nashramh sisters residing in Ruby's domain. Miriam came to feel as though the girl had been her own.

This dream, a short one, began with her lying alone on a bed, giving birth. Afterwards, she experienced many fleeting memories of her life with her lovely daughter Milrine, who had flaxen hair like her mother. She also relived both her and Olimine's enslavement by the black ones. Both had been taken to Borgdragon, where they

helped each other survive for nearly 50 years. At that time, their wave of prisoners was crushed beneath one of the mammoth rollers that smoothed the heavy metal of each layer of the black wall.

The most vivid parts of this dream-memory were Milrine's birth and the period spent at Borgdragon, where the two died together, as they'd been together at Milrine's birth. Olimine's deep sapphire eyes had tears when she remembered that her lovely daughter, whom she believed was more beautiful than she, looked 300 years older by the time they died. Both had somehow made it to their predetermined death spots to complete their assigned roles in the complex circuit that would eventually destroy Borgdragon. Miriam was deeply touched by their devotion to one another even at the moment of death. They died holding hands while looking up at the cloudy sky with its blood-red sun - the symbol of their blood sacrifice to the destruction of that black fortress.

As the memory faded, the sky darkened and the huge 10,000-ton roller bore down on her.

Miriam soon began to feel the full weight of her multiple personalities as she became acquainted with them. Each had been drawn to Borgdragon from throughout the galaxy. Each woman had her own joys and tragedies, and Miriam came to actually experience them herself through their vivid memories, which were channeled from them directly into her own conscious being. All were fused together as one, although each remained individual in her dreams and personal memories.

Miriam learned one thing about all of them; none were very old or experienced in temporal affairs except for ChiMon. Also, 110,000 years of their experience was dominated by their entrapment in Borgdragon's wall. Each had selflessly lent her individual support to Ruby's circuit, which eventually destroyed Gensargon's outpost of hell. Now each, in her own way, was experiencing a newness and rebirth along with Miriam. All agreed there was joy in waking up after the long exile which kept them out of living affairs for so long a time. Besides, there was nothing like taking out a funny story after a few thousand years and retelling it; it was as good as the first time. It was truly good to be corporeal again.

Anim B'Arel, who'd been a young astrophysicist from the Arelium Breathline, found her role as a passive observer to be a good one.

"I have the advantage of seeing, hearing, and feeling life without having to experience its emotional pains," she told Miriam, her luminous black eyes wide and glowing. "You know, I was never very strong, emotionally or physically. That's why I buried myself in the study of astrophysics. When I was captured by the black ones, I was raped by one of the Jerdens, then, enslaved in a brothel because I was considered beautiful. When I became diseased, they cut off my nose to mark me, then, sent me to that terrible wall."

A vivid memory of Borgdragon wall flashed into Miriam's mind, not as she had seen it, but only partially completed. Then she saw the immense roller blocking out all light as it bore down on her, but with an odd perspective. Whereas she could look at something and see a semi-tangible vision of her nose superimposed upon it, in this last vision of Anim's she could not.

The vision blinked, and Anim continued. "I died there under a huge roller, along with countless others. I was so demoralized that I never wanted to live again. When Ruby chose to put me together with you at Borgdragon, I protested, but once I joined with you, I found a new strength and a reason for living. Now I rejoice at the prospects of helping others resist Belial's terrible forces."

Suddenly Miriam felt a wave of deep sadness come over her. "You have no idea of what it is like to be used by beasts, over and over, I . . . I don't want others to have to ever experience the horror of becoming a mere thing for someone to violate."

Then the girl smiled again. "But now I'm content."

Anim's joy was contagious, and even began to affect the ancient Miriam, who was now only stirring in the morass of her own despair of failures from her hidden past. Miriam, the elf child, did not learn much about her ancient namesake, and for a time this bothered her. But Ruby said, "She will reveal herself to you when she's ready and able to heal and to grow again."

Kaalou of the Cherubim was a bloated-looking woman with an oversized head. She'd been a special courier and a guardian of the archive, although Miriam didn't know what this meant. She was a steadfast and brave personality who wept only for others, and felt an intense anguish for the danger faced by other innocent masses from throughout the galaxy.

Kaalou too, like Alsis Jeffnel, died squirming on the frying-pan floor of one of Borgdragon's interrogation cells. Afterwards, her

body was pressed into a part of the wall still under construction. Despite that, she had never experienced personal fear. It was only for the innocent that she feared, and she dedicated her being to protect them.

Miriam soon realized that it was from Kaalou that she'd drawn so much strength at Agtren Estate on Phodden Morg. It was the Cherubim, more than the others, who kept her alive until the Sisters of Telorbin found her, so many centuries now past.

The sleeping child, Miriam, grew steadily in her self-knowledge, and while awake, brought pleasure and joy to her assembled souls. As each year passed and her childhood experiences mounted, they too became younger; even ChiMon, the silent potato found humor in her own reflections. Life as a child was good, and each looked forward to each new day's experience and feelings of joy.

The last to reveal herself to Miriam was the Leven Adah fighter pilot from Tziah, Nestorah. She seldom spoke, but Miriam could almost always hear her purring to herself as she watched and listened. When everyone else had made themselves known to Miriam, she decided to introduce herself as well. She began by saying:

"You seem much more like a kitten than an elf, Miriam B'Mesziah. Elves that I've known are like tinkly bells, each trying to out chime each other. But you're a watcher who waits to be picked up and petted."

Miriam heard the odd voice and looked around for its source. The face slowly came into focus from the shadows of her mind. First only the beautiful cat-like amber eyes glowed with a quiet intellect. Then the girl's soft face developed seeming almost elfin. Her hair was short, and black as tar, with a silken sheen to it. She appeared almost defenseless and innocently vulnerable, except for her oddly glowing eyes. They were both adult and knowing.

"Do you think me pretty?" Nestorah asked with a slight smile, her lips upturned on one side.

"Yes, you are very pretty," Miriam answered, her voice expressing wonder. "You're lovely."

"That's what a Colmer Lord at Borgdragon thought. But," and her smile broadened so Miriam could see the tips of her razor-sharp teeth, "he changed his mind after I clawed one of his eyes out."

Nestorah purred to herself at the memory, and as the visions filled Miriam's mind, she heard the soft purring voice with a slightly hissing undertone to it speaking. "I was captured unconscious when my fighter crashed during an attack on one of their outposts, and I was shipped to Borgdragon in cryo-freeze. After my little affair with the thereafter one-eyed master, I was set loose on the children's playground for their teenagers to hunt. That was a mistake on their part too."

She purred to herself as she reflected on the memory, and her eyes took on an even more luminescent glow. "They stripped 200 of us naked and set us loose on the playground. The teenagers, all blond, blue-eyed beasts, at that, were armed with high-powered stun rifles that paralyzed their victims so they could still be used in the wall's construction. They were also armed with laser pistols in case things got out of hand. It was, indeed, a scene to remember."

Miriam nodded to herself as the vision of the partially completed wall came into view before her. The wall and the immense rollers were a massive backdrop for the insignificant children's playground. All around her was stark and cold and the huge black wall dominated everything, although only partially completed.

Nestorah continued. "The others ran for their lives, but I knew how the black ones dealt with their victims; no one would survive, no matter how far and fast they ran. So, I waited near the wall until the 12 teenage monsters moved onto the grounds. Then I stalked the last one out. I knew that none of us would survive, so I determined to take as many of them with me as I could. The one I followed didn't have a chance . . . and as I leapt on his back, I sank my teeth into his neck . . . he was dead before he hit the ground.

"I then took his laser pistol and dispatched three more before I was paralyzed by a blast from the wall. They ground me into the wall within the hour; they were taking no more chances."

Nestorah now smiled fully, completely revealing her long white teeth. "They didn't know I was armed. And you know, they die just as easily as the rest of us, these Colmer Lords. They really aren't that tough."

Miriam found, in time, that Nestorah had many of the same fears as she did, but was smart and brave enough to do whatever was necessary. She didn't like killing, not even the black ones, but

did so when she absolutely had to. She did enjoy elves, since they liked to play and use their imaginations much like Tzians.

Nestorah also had a soldier's affinity towards Raphael, the Tachalet, whom she said she would like to sink her teeth into, gently, of course.

As the days and weeks slid by, Miriam grew stronger. When she reached her fifth birthday, she was sent to the Ling Wall Academy for gifted girls for her education.

"You know, Miriam," her nurse said, pointing out pictures on the school brochure, "Ling Wall is one of the finest schools for little girls there is. There are all sorts of things to do at summer camp, and lots of girls to play with. There are girls from rich families and many from poor ones who've received special grants for their daughters." Asim smiled, looking down at her little Mimi, who had such pretty dark red eyes.

"You see Mimi, the school is really run by our sisterhood, although no one really knows it, and we use it to help any girl of special merit to join our ranks. The staff sisters who run it are wonderful, and the headmistress, whose name is Heline Ness, really loves little children."

Miriam smiled to herself, pleased that she would be in contact with Heline again. What a small galaxy.

"I wish you could come along too, Asim," she told her plump, matronly-looking teacher and nurse. She meant it too; she wished that her nurse-friend could stay with her. Asim was a gentle woman who needed to love and be loved, and she'd spent hours every day telling Miriam little stories about herself and imparting beautiful words of wisdom.

"I'll write to you when I learn how," Miriam promised, for Asim, like the rest of the nursery staff, knew nothing of what she was. Asim knew only that she belonged to the sisterhood, and loved her for what she appeared to be, a child without her own parents. She and the others did all they could to fill in the gap. When Miriam was ready to leave for Ling Wall, Asim's tears were genuine as she kissed her little Mimi good-bye.

Chapter 4

Jenn

Childhood has its times and the newness of innocence . . . herein lies the paradise of our memories. . . .

19:50-01 SHIKIM 6115-7N5

Sister Heline Ness studied the illustrated document for all incoming students for the mid-year semester. One of the girls' names was vaguely familiar, although it wasn't from the usual prestigious families on her pedigree list.

Name: B'Mesziah, Miriam
Age: 5 years (born 15 Shabin 6110-7N5)
Family: None *
Origin: Ringal Clinic, local zone #2
Race: High Elf, Mesziah DMX92144U

Closing her eyes, Heline sat back in her chair and searched her memory carefully, sorting out the thousands of personalities she'd encountered during the past 380,000 years. Now as she searched, her memories tied in with Council Central. . . .

Yes, now she remembered. It was Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah, her friend from Borgdragon . . . Ruby's child.

Heline sat back, smiling to herself and thinking. This time there would be no jail cells, just a damn good childhood, one to be remembered.

Heline replaced the card and continued with her inventory of new students. She wouldn't contact Miriam for some time, since it

would raise suspicions. Besides, the girl needed an uncluttered childhood. So, that's what she'd get, the best!

Miriam sat alone on her favorite rock, dangling her feet in the cool water of her secret pond. Everybody knew where the pond was, but she liked to pretend she alone had discovered it.

It was a sunny morning, and the light from the yellow sun felt warm on her head and on the large, mossy rock where she sat. Somehow this place, here at the pond, made her nostalgic. Lovely trees loomed above her so thick in areas that the sun came through in long filtered beams. Moss grew everywhere and the deep pond had goldfish swimming in it. The water was so clear and calm that she could see shiny stones five meters below.

This was her second year at summer camp, and boy was she looking forward to it. Especially to the ginmallow roasts and evening songfests around the hot and smoky bonfires. She especially adored the sweet pink, full-flavored ginmallows that stuck to everything and everyone when they melted, and she suspected they were addictive to children.

Last year was great, and this one would be better. Miriam vowed that she would get sick from overstuffing on ginmallows at least once. She wasn't going to be outdone by Eaun Nuask, the champion toad who could out-barf an army.

She'd spotted Eaun as a Magum the first time she'd encountered the little girl with warm brown eyes and carrot colored hair. Eaun was standing alone outside the arched playground entrance, surveying the campus like a haughty general over her army. In the past she'd been a general officer in combined operations with the Odomak's pathfinders, and her accustomed position of authority and practiced self-discipline hadn't yet diminished.

Miriam, smiling to her self, wandered over to Eaun and acted dumb by sticking her lower lip out and asking if she wanted to wrestle. Eaun looked her straight in the eyes as if she were something less than a raw recruit, then, broke out laughing.

"My god, not another one," she said, lowering her voice. "Do I stand out as badly as you do?"

"Only if you know who you're looking at," Miriam replied with a broad smile, adding, "but five-year-old flag officers aren't too common around here."

"I understand," Eaun agreed. "I'd better straighten my act out." She thought for a few moments, rubbing her short, curly red hair until it stood straight up, then added, "I think I'll be a toad. I always liked being obnoxious. What do you think?"

Miriam laughed. "Great! I'll be your rival . . . from a distance, of course. If you can eat it, I can do you one better."

Eaun grinned. "That'll be a cold day . . . rival. See you at the feed tonight. Then you'll know a real toad that's second to none!"

The two friendly rivals parted, each realizing they'd have to act less grown-up and start being little kids. After all, that was why they were here.

That was last year, and Eaun had beaten Miriam at the toad game causing her to nearly barf her brains out for her efforts. But this year Miriam was prepared. She wasn't going to take second place . . . her goal was to be champion!

Miriam stretched and smiled to herself, becoming a little sleepy as the warm morning sunlight filtered lazily through the trees. The pond was clear and lovely today, and sunlight from between the trees sparkled on its calm surface like bright little stars. Yes, this summer would be special, for there were so many fun things to do here as a child. Even though she was a Magum, and the activities here were designed for youngsters with short attention spans, she'd come to enjoy doing as much as she could and meeting all the various kids who bounced around like loose marbles on a washboard.

Sitting alone, thinking childish thoughts completely engrossed Miriam. Suddenly she had the feeling she was no longer alone. Glancing to her right, she was eyeball to belly-button with someone new.

Surprised, Miriam first looked down, seeing two red tennis shoes with badly tied laces, then skinny little legs with green shorts above them, the belly-button, a too short blue 'T' shirt, and above that, a runny nose and two very large, deep blue eyes. All of this was part of a funny little elf, the first Miriam had seen outside of pictures.

The little body had a big head with delicately pointed ears and hair such a dark blue that it was almost black. The little mouth hung open.

"Hello," Miriam said in surprise. "I'm Miriam. Who're you?"

The little figure simply stood there, staring down at her in awe.

"Do you have a name?" asked Miriam.

The mouth remained open as the head nodded.

"Well, what is it?"

Still no response came from the funny creature. Miriam reached up and bonked the top of the girl's head with her knuckles. "Hey! Is anyone in there?"

"Ow," cried the little girl, rubbing at her head.

"So, you can talk," laughed Miriam. "Now, tell me your name or I'll bonk you on the bean again . . . well?"

"Jenn."

"That is very good, Jenn. Now, tell me how old you are."

Jenn raised her hand, showing five fingers. Miriam pursued the question again. "Now Jenn, tell me how old you are or . . ."

"Five."

"Now, isn't it easier to answer than to get bonked?"

Jenn tilted her head to one side for a moment and appeared to be lost in thought. "Yes."

Miriam smiled and said, "Okay then, why don't you sit down here next to me and we can talk."

Jenn, still looking at Miriam, sat down next to her, and after a while, began to talk freely. Miriam soon learned that the little girl loved to talk, providing she didn't have to say anything important. She would panic when asked a question, mostly because she didn't know how to answer it. Miriam knew from her studies of her own world of origin, Mesziah, elves stopped, put on a thinking cap, and wore a serious expression to answer questions. After all, questions were serious business. However, Miriam never realized that this was more than one of Ruby's wry jokes. Looking at the happily babbling Jenn, she realized the little elf was in for real trouble if she didn't learn to communicate, especially in school. Were all elves from Mesziah this immature? Miriam knew that most children were, but as Meszian elves became adults they were no more mature emotionally than children of five or six years of age.

As it turned out, little Jenn was an orphan, or at least she thought so, and she was very lonely. Miriam learned this in a roundabout way in which Jenn spent a lot of time talking to the trees and looking at anything shiny and attractive. After many of these interludes, when Jenn talked about anything and everything she could think of, Miriam discovered that she was the first elf

Jenn had ever seen. Except for herself, of course, and her doll Ginger, who as Jenn said, was a person and not just a doll.

Jenn went on to tell Miriam all about Ginger, her rag doll, and how they had lived on a spaceship that was always going somewhere, but never getting there. She had arrived at this neat place just the day before.

Jenn went on and on, not making a great deal of sense with her monologues about every subject she could think of, but Miriam found her delightful all the same. She definitely liked the funny little elf, for Jenn was sweet and innocent, and liked everybody she met, even Miriam, who had bonked her on her bean.

After more than an hour of this nonsensical talk, the two new friends walked over to the dining hall for their afternoon dinner. Miriam found it interesting that here at the summer camp dinner was the heaviest meal and was served during mid-afternoon, while a lighter supper was served in the evening. Today it was Space Pirate Salad and bread rolls topped off with fruit shakes and Hubble berry pie. The salad was great because the cook had pirated all sorts of nuts and berries from the storeroom and had spiced the leaves and vegetables with them.

After receiving their trays full of food, more than any child could possibly eat at one sitting, but given to them because the cook didn't want the 'poor dears' to starve and waste away, Miriam and Jenn sat down at one of the dozens of cafe tables that accommodated six children. Jenn chatted throughout the entire meal, and by the time Miriam was full, half an hour later, the little elf had hardly begun to eat. Miriam smiled to herself; at this rate, Jenn would happily starve herself.

Jenn lined up all of her nuts in neat rows, saving them for last, and ate all of the berries out of the salad first. Then she systematically ate each component, chattering on all the while, until it was gone, leaving only the leaves and nuts. Watching Jenn eat was a course in primitive anthropology in itself, for although the little elf might starve by talking continuously throughout the entire meal, she certainly took her eating seriously.

After she finished her own desert of the soft and tangy Hubble berry pie with a large scoop of sweetened whipped topping on it, Miriam leaned back, an oddly old little girl, and watched Jenn. Somehow, she knew this funny little elf was going to be with her

for a long time, so now was a good time to get used to her chaotic ways.

Smiling, Miriam mused that Jenn was certainly one of a kind, at least here at Ling Wall Academy's summer camp. She just couldn't imagine a whole world full of these flighty little creatures with their odd eating habits, thinking caps, and non-sequential thinking processes. Boy, this was going to be a real education in itself.

Jenn woke up from a good night's sleep. She was so excited about being at camp, and wondered aloud to Ginger about what great things were in store for her today. Maybe she'd meet some space pirates who'd spirit her and Ginger, and Miriam, of course, off to another world, or maybe she'd meet all of the trees and they would talk to her if she was nice to them. Boy! She and Ginger were going to have lots of fun!

Jenn frowned to herself a little as she pulled on her shoes; she and Ginger wouldn't see her new friend Miriam until this afternoon because Miriam had some "Important Things" to do. When Jenn asked what the Important Things were, Miriam had just replied "Important Things." Well, maybe one day when she was all grown-up like Miriam, Jenn would be able to do all sorts of "Important Things" too.

Pulling absentmindedly at her shoulder-length hair, which was stuck in tight knots, Jenn looked around her yellow, friendly-looking room. The animals on the wallpaper had come to visit her last night, and she could hardly wait to go to sleep again so that she could talk to them. Wasn't life grand!

She looked at her rumpled bed and dimly remembered that her camp counselor had talked about it. Slowly, with infinite care, Jenn set about making her bed as she had been instructed by her counselor, Nitel Glass. When she'd finished her arduous project, she stood back, pleased with her handiwork.

Actually, the sheets and blankets were piled in an untidy heap in the middle of the single bed, with Ginger sitting ceremoniously atop the mountain. Later Jenn would explore the inside of the caves within the blankets, but now she was hungry.

Jenn hastily finished dressing in her green shorts, blue 'T'-shirt, and red tennies, then, rushed out of her bedroom door to head over to the dining hall. Orderliness was a new concept to her, and it would be a long time before she'd get the hang of it.

Kicking a few pebbles here and there with her new tennis shoes, Jenn slowly weaved her way towards the dining hall. Then she stopped for a moment, looking at the tall, mossy trees around her.

"I know what I want to do today. I'll walk through the woods."

Then she merrily skipped along the wooded path, humming a little tune to herself and thinking about all the things she'd found in the woods since she'd come to this neat place. As she strolled absentmindedly through the trees, which were thick here near the camp and the leaves still damp from morning dew, limbs of ferns and other plants waved over her head in the morning breeze.

After walking along for a short time, Jenn came across her favorite tree. She had met this tree the same day she'd met Miriam, and liked to call it 'Mr. Grump'. It was full of bulging knots, and its long and thick mottled brown limbs twisted this way and that as the leafy branches grew high above her head toward the great blue sky.

Jenn mused to herself that someday when she was bigger and could reach Mr. Grump's first huge limb, she would climb up onto his great branches that were like ladders and climb until she could reach the sun. But now she was too short, so she contented herself with seating herself beneath him.

As Jenn sat beneath her friend Mr. Grump, she feasted her eyes on the many beautiful flowers and ferns that grew in clumps around his mammoth trunk.

"I'll bet there's a secret kingdom inside. Oh, let me in."

There had been nothing this neat on the spaceship which she could remember as her only home. She liked trees and flowers much more.

Humming another tune, Jenn imagined herself to be so small that she could climb into one of the gnarled hollows of the massive tree; there was a little hole in front of her, so she squeezed her eye up close to it and looked in. It was dark inside and the harsh bark felt funny against her face so she pulled away, and as her vivid imagination unfolded, she began to talk to herself and her imaginary friends. There were no other children on the ship, only she and Ginger, so Jenn was in the habit of imagining there were other children with her when she played.

"Let's prepare a little home inside the tree hollow", she giggled. "Now, that mushroom will be a sun umbrella, the toadstools are

the chairs, and the pine needles laid out in a row will be the patio floor." Jenn knew what these plants were from her picture books on the ship.

"All my friends are invited to a party, especially my new friend Miriam, with sweet cakes and juice, singing and dancing, and lots of music. Oh! We're going to have a great time!"

Jenn smoothed the loose soil and arranged the sweet-smelling pine needles on the ground, much more neatly than she made her bed. Camp counselors would soon find that she was also adept at making mud pies.

"Now Miriam, would you like plain cakes or the ones with berries and sweet sauce on them? Okay, berries and sweet sauce it is. Jon, what about you? All right, here's your juice. You're welcome, Miriam. Do you know this song? No? Oh well, I'll teach it to you. It goes like this. . . ."

The little elf happily played with her imaginary friends as she always had, oblivious to all else until the dining hall bell sounded for latecomers.

"All of this work singing, and dancing has made me really hungry. I have to go eat breakfast right now because the latecomer's bell just rang. I'll have to say good-bye for awhile. Now don't eat too much Miriam, and you too Jon. I saw you stuff that berry cake down. You don't want to get a tummy ache."

Jenn's imaginary friends said good-bye to her, and afterwards, she strolled to the dining hall for a wonderful breakfast of pancakes and berries, bean sausages, and fresh cream. Boy was it great!

After breakfast, Jenn returned to her room to wash up, and was met there by her counselor, Nitel Glass, who patiently showed her how to make her bed again. Then for the rest of the morning, Jenn played with the other children her own age and attended an art-crafts class. Time flew by as the busy children painted with vivid watercolors and watched as the older girls made and played with paper dolls. Then, before Jenn knew it, the lunch bell rang, and it was time to eat. Jenn stood up from her curled-up position on the floor, and smiled happily at her crafts teacher who had come over to survey her handiwork.

The teacher had to fight to keep from breaking out into laughter. Jenn attempted to paint her favorite tree, but more of the paint had gotten on her than on the paper; it was obvious that at

first she hadn't known what paints were for and tried to color her own skin brown like the tree's bark.

Smiling, the teacher helped Jenn clean up, and then sent her off to lunch.

After lunch, the younger children were sent to their cabin rooms to take naps. Jenn happily lay down on her soft bed and cuddled up with her rag doll, Ginger.

"Now Ginger," she whispered in her little lisp, "its time to rest awhile. Yes, you get under the covers too. I don't want for you to catch a cold."

Jenn giggled to herself. "Let's pretend we're birds flying in the air, all right? Close your eyes, Ginger. It makes flying much easier."

Before long, little Jenn was fast asleep, one arm flung around Ginger, and her other thumb securely corked in her mouth.

Miriam sat alone before a computer console, practicing her binary codes. They were simple, but like everything else in the temporal universe, one had to practice what one already knew to remain good at it. This, she mused to herself, was as true with mental exercises as with physical ones.

So, every morning at 07:30 hours, Miriam had breakfast with the 'early birds', then came to this private children's training building to work on her own projects. This facility was set aside for advanced sisters of the Nashramh - that is, those who were unified binaries and on up to Sisters-Magum. Sixty-two members of this secret group used the facility, although only two were Magums. Schedules for the exercise rooms and computers were arranged to maintain complete anonymity. The sisters were discouraged from fraternizing except in public gatherings, classes, and other social affairs. The girls didn't object. They needed their childhood rest.

Miriam tied into Central Records after she'd finished her assignment, giving her Magum code which opened all channels. Then she selected the personnel file of the elf-child Jennanine B'Mesziah, which appeared on the large screen in front of her.

Name: B'Mesziah, Jennanine
Age: 5 years (05 Maren 6111-7N5)
Family: None
Origin: G.C.C. Plastimik Trader
Race: Low Elf, Meszhiah, DMX92144U

Comments: Jennanine is the only child of Mellinine and Hokzim B'Mesziah, both of Low Meszian stock. Both parents were killed as a result of enemy action against Hamonak space freighter 'Louufen' - 12 Demin 6113-7N5. The child, then two years of age, was rescued by G.C.C. Plastimik Trader. She was consigned to the Nashramh by Special Order NA54406 from Council Central. Jennanine is a first generation off-world Meszian and is to be trained as an experimental student for possible rim operations. See code DUX44162 for project information.

Miriam leaned back in her chair, thinking about the funny little elf. It was no secret that Low Elves were smart, but they were emotionally perpetual children. They had absolutely no idea of what violence was, and were totally innocent of common vices.

Miriam decided to take Jenn under her wing, for Jenn's sake and for her own. After all, the funny little elf had as much to teach her about being a child as she had to learn about becoming an adult.

As the summer progressed, the two girls became fast friends, and Jenn followed her older friend Miriam, who was six, like a happy little duck. Wherever Miriam went, her little duck would cheerily tag along, chattering about anything that came into her head, anything that did not matter, of course.

Then there were Jenn's friends. The little elf seemed to know everyone in the camp, even Eaun the toad. But this summer brought her another good friend. This meeting came about as a group of young children played between classes. Jenn decided on a new game, since she was always the leader when it came to playing.

"Let's play hide-and-seek. I'll cover my eyes while all of you go and hide, and then I'll try to find you. Okay?"

The children agreed with gusto, and the game went smoothly for awhile until they got tired of it. Then two girls wanted to dangle their feet into the giant pond, and one wanted to read a story. But Jenn and another girl wanted to play on the camp swings. The children argued heatedly for several minutes, for no one thought of doing what she wanted to do alone but instead each insisted that everyone do it. Finally, Jenn won out.

"Let's see how high we can swing, Neferah. Okay, let's stop for awhile." Amid the shrieks and whoops of happy girls engrossed in

playing on the swings, Neferah agreed to jump off her swing while it was still partially in the air. She landed unsteadily, bumping her head on the metal frame of the swing set. She squeaked in surprise.

"Are you all right?" asked a worried Jenn.

"Yes, I'm fine," answered the girl, holding her head.

Jenn took charge. "Let me rub it for you and make it all better," she instructed, settling next to her seated friend. Then she began to rub the girl's head gently.

As the initial pain subsided, Neferah began to purr quietly, deep in her throat, in response to the soft caresses on her head. Surprised, Jenn didn't know what to make of it. But it sounded neat.

"Where are you from, Neferah?"

"I'm from Tziah."

"You are always so quiet, how come?" Jenn just couldn't understand how someone never felt like talking, and her new friend Neferah barely ever spoke.

"I'm lonely," replied Neferah solemnly, biting her lip. "I don't know anyone here."

"Oh . . ." said Jenn. "I'm sorry. But you don't have to be lonely, 'cause I'm here with you, and my friend Miriam, who knows everything, will be your friend too . . . and so will my doll, Ginger."

Neferah perked up immediately with a smile that lit up her elfin face. "I've got a doll too. Her name is Nissi."

"Ginger would like to meet Nissi," Jenn answered solemnly. "Boy is your hair silky and black. I'd like to have hair that long too. Oh!"

There was a sharp noise that startled the two girls, who'd been oblivious to the other playing children. Jenn's only response was to sit completely still with her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open. Neferah, on the other hand, jumped a little, turning toward the sound. A girl had just jumped off of one swing and ran for another, the first hitting against the metal frame of the set.

Jenn relaxed almost immediately, and when she turned back to her friend, she noticed that Neferah's open mouth was curved in a funny, almost chilling smile - she had pointed teeth! And out of her slender, delicately soft fingers, long claw-like nails had appeared.

"Boy, Neferah! Wait till I tell Miriam about you. I just know that she'll think you're very special. Boy, I wish I could do that!"

Jenn was really impressed, and after oohing and awing over Neferah's talents for a few moments, the two girls continued their discussion as they walked away from the swing area towards their next crafts class. Neferah, who had been brought to Ling Wall in cryo-freeze, was amazed to learn that Jenn had been raised on a spaceship.

"I wonder how spaceships can stay up in the air in one place, then fly like a bird. The ship has no wings, but birds do. I wonder how they do that?"

"Well, I just don't know," Jenn confessed with an air of seriousness. "But I know someone who does, my friend Miriam. She knows everything. Once I wanted to know how to fix my book because it started coming apart, and I asked Miriam and she showed me how to fix it. She's six and knows everything, I tell you," Jenn declared proudly. Then, frowning, she stopped and thought about Neferah's question for a few moments, and continued, her face clearing of its thoughtful expression. "Let's go ask her how ships fly, Okay? Anything else you want to know?"

"Not now, I guess," answered Neferah, impressed.

Happily, the two skipped over to Miriam's cabin, but it turned out that she wasn't there. "Oh well Neferah," Jenn pouted. "I'll ask her later, all right?"

The two finally made it to their crafts class, late as usual for Jenn. Later, when Jenn told Miriam about her new friend from Tziah who had sharp teeth and claws, she noticed a subtle change come over her friend. Miriam's eyes took on an odd cat-like glow, almost like Neferah's, and she smiled to herself saying nothing. Jenn, who was a little confused, said, "Don't you want to meet my friend, Miriam?"

"Sure I do. She sounds like a good friend to have. Why don't you have Ginger stay overnight with her, and have her doll stay with you? She does have a doll, doesn't she?"

"Oh yes! Her name is Nissi and that's a great idea. I'll see her about it tomorrow."

The following afternoon, after naptime, Jenn hauled her new friend over to Miriam's cabin for a formal introduction. Bursting into Miriam's room, the two smaller children shook her out of an odd daydream where she sat in her chair, seeming asleep, but with her eyes partly open.

"Hey! Miriam, this is my friend Neferah and she can purr!" Jenn announced proudly.

Miriam slowly turned to face Neferah, who, suddenly shy, nodded her head. "So, you are the daughter of the stone desert," she said softly in a language Jenn had never heard before and couldn't understand. "Please be you my honored guest, young princess Neferah B'Tziah of the crystal sands."

Miriam's eyes shone oddly, awakening a feeling of awe in the astonished Tzian's mind. This elf had spoken to her in the high language of her home world!

"I thank you, my honored hostess," she replied in the high dialect of the Tzian language. "May peace be with you."

"Hey!" exclaimed Jenn, her little mouth hanging open in surprise, elf style.

Miriam smiled. "Come on, Jenn have you never heard Tzian before?"

"No. I didn't even know they spoke anything else."

"Well, you do now!"

The three girls sat down on the floor and talked until dinnertime. Neferah was so excited she couldn't stop talking, giggling and purring at the same time, which after a while made her forget to breathe, so she had to calm down a little. This Miriam, she thought to herself, does know everything, just like Jenn says, and those eyes. Do elves really have eyes like that? They're almost Tzian!

Before the two girls had burst in on her, Miriam was discussing the little Tzian with Ruby during her meditation. She'd learned, through Ruby and others at Council Central that the delicate-looking child was a special binary personality which occurred in about one percent of her racial stock, the Leven Adah. She was a princess of a royal family who had never been away from her home world before, although she was a third generation binary.

Neferah was, according to Ruby, a tough and resourceful creature who had much to learn before past experiences, memories, and associations fully broke to the surface of her conscious mind. As it was, only her language and some superficial memories had yet surfaced. It would probably take one or two gamma-matrix revolutions before full cognizance would occur.

Council Central asked Miriam to keep an eye on Neferah and to guide her in the right direction; they had a feeling, with her

background, that the girl would one day become an invaluable Admiralty asset to the Nashramh. This she agreed to.

Neferah glanced over at Jenn, who looked in every way the typical elf, and decided that this Miriam couldn't be an elf. She looked like an elf, but she must be Tzian.

After dinner, Miriam had some Important Things to do, so she left the two little ones to talk excitedly about their next day.

That night, Ginger and Nissi slept with strangers for the first time. New friendships were made this summer that would last a long time.

Chapter 5

Camp

Innocence in the real world has its price . . . and so does growing up. . . .

17:00-01 BENEM 6116-7N5

Summer camp was over, and Miriam lost out to Eaun the champion toad for the second straight year. There was no question about it; Eaun was in a league all by herself.

The girls were bussed back to the main campus, and fall classes began. Miriam's workload as a six-year-old was relatively light, so she increased her private educational load to four hours a day - one session in the morning before her regular classes, when she did two hours of physical workouts in the private gymnasium, and the second session after supper, when she worked on her computer-based studies. This gave her plenty of time to play, too.

Miriam also arranged for Jenn to share a room with her; the student counselor, aware that Jenn needed special attention because of her elfish ways, readily agreed.

On the very first day back, Jenn made herself completely at home, as any outside observer could see. Miriam's side of the room was neat and clean, while Jenn's was a jungle of odds and ends, socks, shoes, toys, and school supplies. Then, of course, there was Jenn's bed, which always had that familiar, slept-in look. Miriam thought the whole situation was rather comical, for Jenn really tried to be as orderly as her older friend, but she was an elf at heart.

During Jenn's first evening in the room, when Miriam was gone for her two hours of "Important Things", Jenn put all of her clothes and toys away, elf style. Then sitting comfortably on the chair at Miriam's desk, she began to use her imagination, muttering her thoughts aloud.

"Let's see now. What shall I do hmmmm? I feel like hiding so no one can see me. I know! I'll play mystery house. Sound good, Ginger?"

Jenn giggled to herself as she made her big plans. She collected Ginger and some of her other toys and prepared to climb under her bed. "Come on, Ginger, we're going to make our mystery house under our bed. First we need our favorite blanket." There was some scuffling around beneath the bed as Jenn arranged the toys, and her arm came out and pulled her favorite green blanket from its ceremonious place, strewn over her pillow. She giggled again.

"Now I have to fix the bed so the spread hangs over the side, or someone will see us." She reached up to tug at it, but had to crawl part way out to pull the lively pink bedspread down. "Now that's all straightened up."

Jenn finished her preparations, all the while talking to Ginger, and to Miriam whom she pretended was still there. Then, after grabbing more toys and holding on to all of them, she climbed back under the bed.

Sitting down with a plop, Jenn looked around her, "Hmmmm. While we're here, we can play school. So I'd better get some school stuff out of the desk."

Crawling back out from under the bed, Jenn made straight for Miriam's desk again, all the while talking to Ginger, who still lay propped up under the bed. "Now, what do we need? Ah yes, a pen, and of course some paper, Hmmmm, and a ruler. Yup, this will get us started, my little doll. Oh, I almost forgot, Ginger. I need a red ink pen so I can correct your mistakes."

Clutching Miriam's new school supplies, Jenn crawled back under the bed and made her self comfortable. "Here we are, Ginger. Now isn't this cozy?"

From under the bed came sounds of giggling.

When Miriam returned from her computer language exercises, she immediately saw her desk drawers pulled open. As she looked at them in surprise, she heard noises coming from beneath Jenn's bed, and stopped to listen for a moment.

Jenn, caught up in her game and oblivious to Miriam's presence, continued talking to her doll, Ginger. "Now what shape is this? That's right, it's a triangle. You get a star today for doing so well in class."

Kneeling down, Miriam looked under the bed and knocked on the floor. "Hey Jenn, can I come in?"

"Sure, but wipe your feet first," giggled Jenn.

Miriam peered under the bed, seeing most of Jenn's toys strewn about and Ginger sitting propped up against a book. She crawled part way into Jenn's 'house', noticing that Jenn had put her pad of paper to good use. The little elf hadn't filled up each sheet, but had drawn numerous designs, numbers, and letters on every piece of paper. So much for modern art, Miriam laughed to herself.

After crawling under the bed, Miriam talked and played with Jenn for awhile until it was time for lights out. She realized that although she had the mentality of a Magum, playing children's games was fun, because it gave her mind a break from adult troubles to which she was still exposed to as a child. At ten minutes before lights out, the two went to the bathroom and cleaned up, ending by brushing their teeth. Jenn had yet to discover the true use of a toothbrush, for she preferred to stick the toothpaste on the mirror and swirl it around to make designs.

Once in bed, Jenn was asleep in minutes, one arm around Ginger and her thumb in her mouth. Miriam smiled at the funny little elf, and dropped off to sleep.

As the months sped by, Jenn and Neferah, who billeted with another girl down the hall, spent many hours together. Some were spent under Jenn's bed, or at Miriam's desk, playing school and other pastimes while Miriam lay on her bed, reading. The two girls weren't exactly intellectuals, but what five-year-old was? As it turned out, though, Miriam taught both youngsters a great deal over the next several years, all in the guise of 'playing school'. She taught Jenn 'elf basic,' the primary language of Meszhiah, their world of origin. There were several thousand dialects spoken on the large world, but 'basic' was understood by everyone to one degree or another.

Miriam also conversed with Neferah in High Tzian, and expanded both her vocabulary and grammar. And, using this approach to their native languages, she taught them the basics of Nashramh culture, history, and lore as Ruby had taught her at

Borgdragon so long ago, with strong emphasis placed on moral values and ethical behavior.

The two children worked harder at 'play school' than at their real studies, and to the surprise of their teachers, both improved immensely in their comprehension tests. It became obvious to the sister-teachers that Jenn and Neferah were receiving specialized training from a professional. There was obviously the influence of an elder sister at work here.

Miriam concentrated many of these lessons in a never-ending story, in segments each evening before they went to bed. During the early years, she began with the lighthearted adventures of the elf-girl Linn and her best friend, a faery named Lilth. The two happy little creatures lived on Mesziah, and did all sorts of interesting things. Miriam described them at length, teaching Jenn and Neferah much about Mesziah. She talked about the people there, the kinds of vegetation and animal life, the way people lived, the foods they ate, the folklore they enjoyed, and other interesting details she skillfully weaved into the story all at once. It was so funny, exciting, and pleasurable that the two little girls could barely wait for the next evening's episode. Despite all the details, they were far from bored and would giggle and chatter about the stories at every opportunity.

As the two girls grew older, Miriam's stories always focused on Linn and Lilth and the strange and exotic people they met, and grew more complex in detail and flavor. After exhausting all the details she could about Mesziah, which took several months, she went on to Linn's visit to Tziah. It was supposed to be a secret, but somehow Lilth managed to pack herself away so she could come too. During this great adventure to the cold stone deserts of Tziah, the two girls learned much about space travel and about the beautiful desert world. Miriam spent another several months exhausting all the details on Tziah she could weave into the grand story.

As the characters in the story grew in complexity, so did the subjects being taught. At first Miriam taught only literal subjects, such as cultural histories and scientific studies of different kinds of worlds; these were guised as Linn's minute observations and comments. But soon, as the two little girls began to grasp certain ways of thinking Miriam tried to instill into them, they began to understand deeper levels of meaning: inference, and intuitive

feelings. The deepest level contained in Miriam's stories, were secrets that would be discovered much later. It was the first three levels of meaning that Miriam stressed in her stories. She taught Jenn and Neferah to understand and identify the differences between the apparent story, the things that were inferred in them, and those things that they could discover intuitively.

Miriam's stories cleverly wove various kinds of subjects into Linn's adventures, such as descriptions of vegetation, suns, moons, worlds, animals, human races, space travel, myths, foods, lifestyles, and governments, as well as subtle lessons dealing with the black ones. Moreover, she taught them about human loneliness, power, evil and moral values. She coupled her stories with hundreds of songs and poems from many worlds, with simple yet subtly stimulating games, and with excursions into the area of foreign languages. As the two girls progressed through this, she began to introduce them to the elaborate histories of the Nashramh and the little-known myths of an ancient Brotherhood, to which Jenn and Neferah shivered in the delight of little children sharing a special secret.

And a secret it was. Neither of the two told any other friends about Miriam's stories, since they wanted to keep the special joys to themselves and because Miriam didn't encourage it. Yet the changes in the two, and the increased volume and quality of their knowledge, was completely obvious to their teachers. The stories were so interesting to the children that when one of their classes began to study any of the subjects from a given story, such as astronomy or galactic history, they perked up to learn all that they could to show off to Miriam.

Miriam saw the change come over them during their childhood years, for while her never-ending story did nothing to take away their childhood innocence. Both Jenn and Neferah learned a great deal about adult matters that would otherwise have gone over their heads. If either ever got caught in a quandary, she could relate her situation to one of Linn or Lilth's similar problems, and then do her best to follow the example. Neither child ever had any idea that extremely complex and adult ideas were being fed to them in their never-ending story.

Miriam was able to teach them about the subtleties of the black ones, stressing their great beauty and fairness which hid the dark and terrible secrets. She showed them how to discount the obvious

horrors children often fear and how to understand the real nature of evil. She talked about power of various kinds, and about how absolute power corrupts absolutely. She spoke about the future, so often, that Neferah thought Miriam was not only a Tzian huntress in disguise, but also a prophetess. Jenn was impressed but too immature to appreciate any of these qualities.

"No, my dear, Neferah," Miriam laughed, "I'm not a prophetess."

"Then why do you know everything?" Neferah asked.

Miriam laughed again; the two still weren't even near ready to learn about binary personalities, so she took on a more direct and simplistic explanation.

"Prophesy is difficult, it's more than just knowing what events will happen in the future. It's different from precognition, which is the sudden and sure knowledge of a future event that apparently occurs with sensitive people. Prophesy is, instead, the careful assimilation of both important and random facts and events, either consciously or unconsciously. All are brought together as a clear vision of what will happen next in linear time. Take, for instance, the group: a, 1; c, 3; e, 5; and g, 7. Now, what is the next couplet?"

Neferah piped up immediately. "It's i, 9, right?"

Miriam nodded. "You're now an honorary prophetess," she smiled, while Jenn looked confused. "But seriously now. You see, Jenn, I gave a certain pattern; in this case it was made up of letters and numbers that correspond, two apart. By all rights the next letter and number should be as Neferah has stated. Now in essence, prophesy is much more. One assimilates everything, picks out what fits a pattern, any pattern of any kind, and predicts what will occur next, sort of like knowing a plan in advance." Miriam paused.

"It's in this way certain rumors or myths are spread throughout various cultures, as I told you some time ago. These myths are usually spread for a purpose; they cause a society to do certain things when they're faced with limitations that impose stressful conditions. For instance, the black ones have spread the myth that Sweet Sargon will return in foul times to liberate all of his faithful who sacrifice everything for him. People, who're afraid, for any reason, are often willing to accept such a favorable myth. So, slowly at first, people begin to believe Sweet Sargon really exists. They begin to take harder workloads and are happy with less, and in time, lose their individualism to be an accepted member of his

faithful flock. They become faithful followers of Sweet Sargon, and become so zealous, so eager to please, that they give up everything. And usually these people begin to destroy those who aren't of the faithful." Miriam spoke evenly.

"Then the unfaithful begin to fight those who are. This combined with any number of predictable events cause the society to realize that it's living in the prophesized time. When this happens, they expect Sweet Sargon to arrive. And when he does appear, they willingly flock to him with open arms and give him whatever he desires."

Miriam sat back nodding her head. "My main point is that the black ones, whom we already know want to take over our galaxy, sow this myth far and wide so this very outcome will occur. This is a kind of prophesy; the kind by which a future situation can be created through repetition of a given myth."

"But what about when someone just knows what's going to happen in the future?" Neferah asked, while Jenn looked on, wide-eyed and not really comprehending.

"Well, as I've said, there is precognition, for reasons that are complex and difficult to explain; I won't discuss it. There is also the true prophesy, where, as I've said, a person manages to determine a complex pattern in a series of events and can see what's likely to happen next. But in this case, he doesn't envision an individual person's future, but rather a future that occurs to the masses. The multitudes of people, who're all a part of these masses, and all of their planned and random actions, combine to form an intricate pattern that special people discern and understand. This kind of person is a prophet or prophetess. He or she sees the line running through the pattern and in this way can see a possible future, if not a probable one. And yet if what occurs in the future is as he or she has seen and exposed, he could well have been instrumental in shaping that very aspect of the future. But then, who knows?"

By now, the two little girls were completely lost, but Miriam was somewhere else. She was suddenly aware that Ruby was with her; she had unknowingly slumped into the relaxed position of concentration and reflection.

"And what do you see?" Ruby asked, a smile playing over her lips. "What do you see with respect to the black ones and their myths?"

"Jihad, holy war, a war involving Sargon's faithful against all other religious and secular populations. A conflict lasting millions of years but not won by Samael's hordes . . . our own values will control our Starset Galaxy in time and we'll endure, oh, but the price we'll have to pay."

Ruby nodded. "Now you see how we've planned so far ahead."

Suddenly, Miriam snapped back out of her trance, and saw the two surprised little girls looking at her. Neferah was obviously fascinated, while Jenn was apprehensive. "Oh, well, it's time we thought about going to bed. We have time for only a little of the story tonight. Let me tell you about Lilth's ability to keep secrets."

Jenn and Neferah looked at each other and giggled. Everybody knew faeries couldn't keep a secret if they tried!

Miriam continued to work with the two children to prepare them for an uncertain future. The tides of war were beginning to ebb and flow on the outer rim-worlds. Increasing numbers of incidents mounted, including enemy probing actions, and many of the outer star systems were lost to their control. Intelligence reports from Nashramh deep-penetration surveillance ships and infiltration teams clearly indicated preparations for a major invasion.

The destruction of the three black fortresses by Nashramh agents, 100 centuries earlier, disrupted Adam Belial's invasion, which was in its final stages of planning. This destruction resulted in the loss of a Belial, named Gensargon, along with more than 100,000 years of specialized enemy military data stored in the black fortresses' massive computers. This devastated the enemy's planned attempt to divide and conquer the Starset Galaxy. Unfortunately, in the past 10,000 years they had time to regroup. A second invasion could occur within the next century or two, according to the best Nashramh intelligence data available.

During her private study sessions, Miriam kept up on galactic news and secret Nashramh intelligence reports. After examining the projected invasion time, she often wondered to herself if the little ones at Ling Wall Academy would even have a future. There was no guarantee that the black ones wouldn't succeed in their second try at conquering the Starset's soul. They'd nearly succeeded in their first attempt at mass penetration, except for the desperate sacrifices of Nashramh agents. Preparations for defense of the galaxy by the Galactic Common Confederations were in

progress, but they were unfortunately working in the dark. There was no actual knowledge of enemy fleet capabilities, for they seldom lost a skirmish and had never lost a vessel to Confederation capture.

Now that she was 11 years-old, Miriam was qualified to take Nashramh pre-entrance examinations, which were given at Ling Wall during the month of Benem each year. In Miriam's case, these tests were for show only, since she was already one of the highest ranking sisters in the Sisterhood. Still, she took them seriously and studied long hours anyway. One thing she'd learned over the years was never to take anything for granted; this way one could do one's the best, no matter what the task.

Miriam also worked long and hard to prepare Jenn and Neferah for these tests. The little Tzian took the work seriously and studied hard to master both the mental and physical requirements. Miriam soon learned that Neferah was exceptionally bright and she learned what Miriam had to offer quite quickly. Miriam knew she would do well on her own.

Jenn, on the other hand, although she had a sharp mind, only studied the material because both Miriam and Neferah were doing it. She'd much rather 'play house' or other games with the two, but studied with them instead so she wouldn't be left out. Besides, she knew summer camp would begin the next month. That was her favorite time of year.

Miriam understood Jenn's problems with studying. To make the information more accessible to both girls, she developed clever mental and physical games which all three could play together. Jenn never knew that she was learning anything, since she was having too much fun memorizing neat things and showing off her memory to Miriam and Neferah.

Jenn found one other thing odd this year. Miriam's arch rival, Eaun the toad, was spending an awful lot of time in serious conversation with Miriam. Whenever they were together, they never smiled. Once, Neferah even overheard them talking about war, the concept of which was a complete mystery to Jenn.

Neferah learned an important lesson about Miriam that year, one she couldn't fully understand, but which made her extremely uncomfortable around her friend for a long time afterwards. She'd pestered Miriam daily to make sure both she and Jenn got to bunk with her at summer camp. When Miriam told her the final decision

was up to the camp counselors, the little girl, miffed, had responded hotly:

"Aw, you just don't want us little kids around, Miriam. You and Eaun just want to be alone so you can talk about war."

Neferah saw a terrible look come into Miriam's eyes, much like her father's when he was angry, although the elf's face was calm.

Miriam looked at Neferah for a long moment. Then she spoke quietly. "You, young princess of the stone desert, will never speak of my conversations with Eaun Nuask again."

The voice was caressingly gentle, but the strange look in Miriam's eyes terrified the little Tzian, who stood speechless and was suddenly next to tears. Then she whirled away and was gone from Miriam's room.

Nothing was ever mentioned again about Eaun or the conversations, and Neferah became very cautious around Miriam. She never again brought up her wish to spend the summer in the same room with Miriam and Jenn. For quite awhile she remained distant, unable to confide in Miriam, whom she didn't feel comfortable with.

Somehow, Neferah felt, Miriam wasn't a real elf but a Tzian huntress in disguise. She'd thought about her first meeting with Miriam a lot during the past five years and couldn't see how Miriam could know so much about Tziah and speak the high language so perfectly. Jenn was right when she said Miriam knew everything . . . she did. But from the day of that confrontation, on, this fact bothered Neferah a great deal.

She knew she was no equal to Miriam, but her nose had been rubbed in it, and now she felt as if she were insignificant next to the elf, and of little importance. And here she was to experience her first taste of bitterness. Neferah knew that next to Jenn, who was her best friend and the sweetest person in the whole galaxy, she was more serious and could communicate more fully and intelligently with Miriam. Yet Jenn was somehow more important in Miriam's eyes than Neferah, and this irked her. Jenn was nowhere near Miriam's level; the difference here was that Jenn didn't really know it and never felt out of place.

As soon as Neferah ran from her room, Miriam felt hurt and sad. She'd been startled when Neferah had mentioned overhearing her conversations with Eaun, and her first thought was that Neferah might mention it somewhere else where it might cause

damage. Hence she told Neferah to 'can it' so the girl would keep her mouth shut. She immediately felt terrible about having confronted the little Tzian. Neferah had shown shock, and an immediate hostility which shone in her eyes just before she ran out. Miriam was unhappy that she'd been put in a position to create bad feelings in the first place, but unfortunately her anonymity and secrecy here were more important in the long run.

Summer camp was great this year, since the ten-year-olds got to play on the Smack Ball team and compete for championships. Everybody was busy as the days shot by, and before Miriam quite realized it, the lovely summer was nearly over.

This year she hadn't been active in organized sports, or the normal rivalry with Eaun the toad. Instead, she'd spent a lot of time by her secret pond, daydreaming. Long ago, when she was still a new Magum, she remembered, there'd been Ben Condon, with the gap in his teeth and red hair. How did it go? Oh, yes. "Ben Condon is my name, and eating little elves is my game. . . ."

Miriam's eyes wandered across the clear sparkling pond, and she tried to imagine that gentle Odomak with his lovely and sensitive faery flowers. Had he died in battle, or on some hostile world? Married . . . ? Miriam frowned; how she wished she could cry, or shout, or do something that would keep her from feeling so old . . . and alone.

The notice on the dining room doors read:

Thirty packages of ginmallows and 22 liters of balue juice have been stolen from the kitchen. If anyone knows who the thief is (thieves are), please notify the camp counselor Bahr Wynn. Reward offered.

Miriam read the notice and smiled to herself. All they'd have to do was wait and see who turned up sick or who suddenly lost their appetite.

After her morning exercises, Miriam reported to her biology class, which dealt with the various little bugs and things found at the camp. She was amazed at the variety of unseen life forms around the camp and delighted in studying them. The instructor was right; it was a jungle out there.

Leaving her class, she almost ran into Sister-Counselor Nitel Glass, one of the older camp counselors. The blonde woman took

her firmly by the arm, saying, "You're Miriam B'Mesziah, are you not?"

"Yes, I am," answered Miriam, looking up at the stately woman. God! Adults were so big. "What may I do for you?"

The woman narrowed her grey eyes, and crisply answered, "Just come along to the administration building." Her lips puckered a little as she pursed her thin mouth. "We would like to ask you a few questions in my office."

Puzzled, Miriam walked to the administration building with the counselor, who, for some reason, held her arm gently but firmly.

Once inside the large, friendly-looking building, the two moved into Nitel's office, where Miriam was told to sit down and wait. Then Nitel left the room.

Miriam sat still, waiting for whatever was to come. She sensed that something was definitely wrong, but she didn't know what. Was she going to be tested in some way? She didn't have the slightest idea of what was going on.

As she waited, Miriam looked around the office. It was nicely furnished with light-colored furniture fashioned from glass and wicker. A light colored wood desk sat in the middle. There were several plants placed around the room, but no pictures or other art objects.

Nitel returned with another woman. "This is Bahr Wynn, our head counselor," announced Nitel, sitting behind her desk. "Now, Miriam, what did you do with the ginmallows and balue juice you stole from the kitchen?"

Miriam was shocked. Whatever she'd expected, it wasn't this. Were they actually accusing her of taking those things? After a moment's reflection, she wanted to laugh. But, whatever happened, she would remain quiet and find out the facts before responding. Something was certainly out-of-order here.

"Didn't you hear me?" Nitel barked, slapping her hand down on the desk with a resounding smack. "We have a reliable informant who has sworn that she saw you take the ginmallows and juice."

Miriam raised her eyebrow, and Bahr noticed that this little girl seemed somehow very old. She asked, "Who?" wondering why someone would want to frame her.

"That's none of your business. We expect you to return the stolen property and tell us who was in on it with you."

Miriam remained silent, wondering if this was a test or if she'd really been accused by some unknown person. Obviously it was her business if she'd actually been accused, but that was beside the point. Whatever the case, she decided to remain passive. It was obvious Nitel Glass wouldn't believe anything she said anyway.

"Look, Miriam, you're going to sit there until you respond to our questions," Nitel declared; she was becoming a little unsettled by the girl's calm eyes, which appeared to be deep and empty.

Bahr, a matronly, iron grey-haired woman with soft brown eyes, sat silently beside the desk, thumbing through Miriam's camp file. She noted that Miriam was due to take her Sisterhood pre-entrance examination the following month. Looking quietly at the elf, she softly pointed out the fact to her, adding, "This behavior of yours can cost you your opportunity to take your pre-exams next month. But, if you come clean now, I'll try to keep your record straight. Otherwise, you can forget about the exams, now or ever."

Miriam remained silent, since protesting her innocence would be meaningless in this instance.

Two hours later, after trying to get the silent girl to confess, the two frustrated counselors decided she must be guilty. Miriam was sentenced to a switching and confinement to her room until camp was out. The switching was administered by Bahr, who applied it with vigor, and was surprised when Miriam remained silent and shed no tears. In her eyes, this was one tough little girl who needed a lesson or two. Miriam was sent to her room with instructions to leave only to use the bathroom and to attend her regular meals.

Jenn was happily playing under the desk when Miriam entered the room. Peeking out, she called, "Hi Miriam. Want to come in?"

"No thank you, Jenn. I'm going to lie down for awhile," she replied.

Miriam turned so she could lie down on her stomach, and when Jenn saw the angry red welts on the back of her legs, she was shocked, almost to tears. Scurrying out from her nest under the desk, she cried, "What happened to you Miriam, your legs!"

"Nothing to worry about, Jenn, I've been through a lot worse."

Jenn wouldn't be put off, and started to cry when she saw the ladder of swollen, red welts on the back of Miriam's legs. She was so upset that she nearly got sick; she'd never seen anyone hurt like this before, and bombarded Miriam with a flurry of questions.

Receiving no answers, Jenn sat on the edge of Miriam's bed and cried for her.

Fourteen dejected prisoners of war were marched into the interrogation room by a hard-eyed Nitel Glass and two thin-lipped assistants. "Stand at attention, you scum," she ordered in a harsh voice. "And keep your yaps shut!"

Within moments, Bahr Wynn entered the room, still dressed in her night robe. "So," she drawled condescendingly, "which of you is the ringleader of this scummy crew?" She paused for a moment, then sneered, "Come on, speak up!"

"I am," responded a small voice in the second row.

"Well what was it, Nitel, a graduation bash?" Bahr sighed, looking tiredly at the counselor.

"That is what it looks like. What do you think we should do with them?"

Bahr looked at the small girl in the second row and snapped, "you! What's your name?"

"Mola Bitz, ma'am," answered the voice, quivering.

"Did Miriam B'Mesziah, the elf, have anything to do with this caper?"

The little red-haired girl looked confused, "Miriam who?"

"You heard me. Miriam B'Mesziah, the 11 year old elf."

"We know no 11-year-olds," Mola answered, hesitantly and a bit coolly. "They're just little kids."

Bahr sneered, "Well, at 18, you aren't acting much older."

The interrogation went on throughout the night, and it became apparent that these were indeed the culprits. No one else had heard of Miriam B'Mesziah. And that was that.

The following afternoon, after further investigations were made and facts verified, the secret informant was summoned to Nitel's office. The little girl stuck to her story about Miriam, although this time she admitted that she had seen neither the ginmallows nor juice, but maintained that she knew that Miriam was guilty. The girl became upset when she learned Miriam had been switched and confined to her room, and she genuinely showed no malice toward her.

The counselors were dumbfounded, finally concluding that the little girl, who was distraught and crying, had made an honest mistake. Then, later, unbeknown to Miriam, both Nitel and Bahr reviewed her file with the headmistress, Heline Ness, who wanted

to know why there was a negative recommendation for the girl's upcoming examinations. Heline knew Miriam was a Sister-Magum.

The two counselors discussed the chain of events, ending with the details of Miriam's stubborn silence and her sentence of punishment. When Heline heard about the switching, she sat back in her chair and stared wide-eyed at the two counselors as if they were crazy.

"Do you have the slightest idea of who it was you switched?" she asked, her green eyes narrowing.

The two counselors, suddenly uneasy, exchanged glances, not knowing what to say.

"Well, my little dears," Heline articulated clearly, "you have beaten up a Sister-Magum. And, I might add, one who is very well-thought-of throughout our sisterhood."

Nitel paled and pressed her hand to her forehead, saying to herself, "I knew it . . . those eyes. Now I'm going to Samael's Hell. I should have known. Damn that little girl . . ." She was suddenly angry at the informant who caused this mix-up in the first place.

Bahr just stood still, her eyes bulging.

"Now, now, children, it could be worse. I had her in jail on trumped up charges myself, and she forgave me," Heline said, walking around her desk and patting the two distraught Sister-Counselors on their shoulders. "You'll have time . . . a lot of time, to make amends," she smiled.

News of the capture of the 14 culprits spread throughout the camp like wildfire, and it was rumored that they'd be skinned alive. Upon hearing of this, Miriam smiled to herself, wondering how the counselors were going to save face about their dealings with her.

At dinner, Miriam and Neferah ate without Jenn, who hadn't been seen for a couple of hours. After making a few inquiries, they learned that Jenn was summoned to Nitel Glass' office for some reason or other.

That evening, just before bedtime, Jenn returned to her room looking very tired and strained.

"Where have you been, Jenn?" Miriam asked softly, watching the little elf carefully. This was the first time Jenn had ever missed a meal or come home late that Miriam knew of, and she knew why.

"Oh, just out," Jenn replied, looking at the floor as if it was brand new.

"Really, now," said Miriam, pursing her lips. "Are you sure you weren't at Nitel Glass' office?"

The little elf shuffled her feet and continued to stare at the floor.

Miriam knew now who her accuser was. "Jenn, why did you tell them I was the thief?"

Jenn said nothing, looking as though she was going to cry.

"I know it was you, Jenn. Why did you do it?"

Jenn burst into tears and flung herself at Miriam. "I love you Miriam! Don't go away . . . please!" She hung desperately onto Miriam's arm and sobbed. "I didn't know they'd hurt you - I didn't know . . ."

Miriam gently pushed the distraught little girl away, understanding. She'd seen the love in Jenn's eyes when she'd first looked up at the funny little elf with the runny nose, the belly button, and the red tennis shoes. She, too, felt an affinity for Jenn and had known, even as she did now, that their destinies were forever intertwined.

Miriam sighed. The problem was that Jenn would get herself into real trouble, if she hadn't already done so. In her innocence, she didn't know what trouble her lies of love could cause.

She led Jenn to the shower room, and both cleaned up and brushed their teeth. Then they returned to their room, Jenn being somewhat happier.

Once inside, without warning, Miriam grasped Jenn by the shoulders and pushed her against the wall, saying, "I'm not going anywhere, Jenn, but this isn't over yet. We'll talk about it tomorrow on our way back to the academy. Do you understand?"

Jenn's big blue eyes widened in surprise as she found herself pressed against the wall. Looking at Miriam from beneath her lashes, she answered, "Yes."

The next morning, over a dozen buses loaded up with sad children after breakfast. Nobody wanted to see the summer end, but this was to be their horrid fate, at least until next year.

While they waited for their bus, Miriam asked Jenn, "Do you know how to fight?"

"Huh?"

"You heard me. Do you know how to fight?"

"No."

"Well then, starting tomorrow morning, after breakfast, I'm going to start teaching you how to fight. And when you know how, I'm going to beat the stuffings out of you. Do you understand?"

Jenn looked up at her in her most appealing manner. "I don't want to fight with you, Miriam. Can't we play house instead?"

Miriam resisted the urge to smile; she didn't like what she had to say and do, but this was serious.

"Jenn, your childhood days are over as of now. You're going to go everywhere I go, and do everything I tell you to do. You're going to start growing up fast. That I promise."

Neferah showed up with three bags of crumb nuts for the journey, and noticed that Jenn was sullen, if not next to tears. Ginger, her doll, hung dejectedly from her clenched hand and trailed on the grassy ground, and it seemed that something was very wrong. Neferah had never seen Jenn look so down and out.

She started to say something that would make Jenn feel better when she saw that terrible glow in Miriam's eyes. She turned away and immediately looked elsewhere. Whatever was wrong, she wasn't going to tangle with Miriam. Too many strange things had happened this last week, and she wasn't going to try to find out why, especially not from Miriam.

Chapter 6

Eaun

The first time I recall Eaun Mask's name ever appearing on rim fleet records was in NOAIM 4378-4N1, after losing the SD Adolay-Zee with all hands, and she was discovered to be the only survivor on an enemy held world. Eaun was tough as tiger dung then, as now, but differed in her understanding of compassion. Now, a few hundred thousand years later with Jannanine B'Mesziah, we find a firm glimmer of the concept entering into her regimen. . . .

07:00-02 BENEM 6121-7N5

Miriam considered Jenn over breakfast as the little elf nervously picked at her sweet sausages and eggs. This morning started out with an inspection of Jenn's bed and surrounding area, and it was a disaster. Miriam tore apart the bedding five times and stood over a sullen, tearful Jenn as she remade it five times. Though it still looked slept in, it was a start. Also, all toys, except for Ginger, of course, were to be put away in Jenn's toy box at all times that they weren't in use. Otherwise, Miriam threatened they would end up in the garbage. Jenn stuck out her lower lip and attempted to look innocent and appealing, but Miriam made it clear this was the law. She had every intention of becoming Jenn's new drill sergeant while Jenn became the raw recruit. Although it seemed unfair to treat the child in this manner, Jenn had to be taught how to survive as an off-world elf before she grew too old and set in her ways.

After breakfast, the two walked to the special education building that Miriam attended since her arrival at Ling Wall. Jenn

had never been in the large, unimpressive looking building, and hadn't even known it was part of the academy. Her face lit up in a smile. She imagined she'd soon discover new and wonderful things, but Miriam gave her a stern look and the little elf's smile faded.

Miriam led Jenn into a gymnasium with a hardwood floor partially covered with long mats. She would teach Jenn how to grow up and survive in this hard galaxy no matter how many tears and frowns the girl gave her.

"This is where you begin your new life," Miriam stated quietly. "And now, Jenn, I want you to listen carefully, because I'm not going to repeat myself. The rules are simple. You will do exactly as I tell you without hesitation and continue to do so until I tell you to stop. Now do you understand?" Miriam's tone sharpened.

Jenn, was trying to look unobtrusively around the large, unfurnished room, snapped her attention back to Miriam and nodded, her mouth hanging open. "Yes," she agreed amiably, having no idea what Miriam was talking about.

Miriam pursed her mouth, knowing Jenn didn't understand. But she continued on. "All right, this is how you stand at attention . . . feet . . . at a 45 degree angle." Miriam showed the little elf how to do each position for each command, making sure she could do it correctly before moving on to the next. Then she began to drill Jenn, much as a drill sergeant puts raw recruits through their paces. At first Jenn didn't mind the rapid succession of drill movements, and did quite well because they were fun. Then she started getting tired as her endurance and interest began giving out.

"Attention! Parade Rest! Attention! At Ease! Attention! Hand Salute! Parade Rest!" Jenn started to slump.

"Cut that out! Stand at attention!" Miriam bellowed at the sagging girl, who jerked to attention in surprise. Her eyes widened as she wondered why Miriam was yelling at her. After all, she was trying.

After an hour of basic drill, Jenn could hardly move, and her senses began to spin. Tired, she decided to play dead. Crumpling to the floor, she refused to move.

Suddenly, she was standing upright again, having been jerked up from behind by her hair.

"I said stand at attention!" Miriam hissed.

Absolutely flabbergasted at her friend's cruelty, Jenn began to cry, huge tears rolling down her cheeks, and she started to slump again. Suddenly, she heard a loud smack! Miriam had slapped her across the face!

The blow left a white imprint on her cheek, and surprised more than hurt, Jenn immediately snapped to attention, her eyes as big as saucers. Miriam had hit her!

The basic drill exercises continued for another hour before the two girls left for their room to clean up for classes. Jenn was so sore she could hardly move or concentrate on untangling her hair.

"We'll go over these exercises again tomorrow," Miriam announced. Jenn began to realize just what Miriam was talking about.

Eaun Nuask caught Miriam by the arm as they passed in the hallway between classes. "Sister Miriam," she whispered softly so no one else could hear. "I want to talk to you at the study break. Will you meet me in D206?"

"Yes, if you wish it," replied Miriam, slightly mystified. "Anything in particular you want to discuss?"

"Yes, but we'll talk about it during break." With this, Eaun sped off to her next class.

At 14:00 hours, Miriam arrived. "What can I do for you, Eaun?" she asked.

"No Miriam, it is what I can do for you," Eaun replied, smiling grimly. Miriam frowned a little, wondering what she was talking about.

"I know about your problem with Jennanine, since Ruby spoke to me about it. I think I'm well-suited to help you with part of the problem, which is obviously the drill and exercise portion."

"Is there a particular reason for this, Eaun?"

"Yes, and it's threefold. First, I'm a soldier with a lot of experience with recruits. Second, you're too close to the child to do her any real good in this area. She'll do what you tell her only because she loves you, but she'll learn nothing. With me, she'll be terrified and learn what I have to teach whether she likes it or not. And third, I feel that I owe you one from a long time ago."

Miriam nodded. "I agree with you completely on the first two accounts, and I really welcome your help," she affirmed. "But I haven't the slightest idea what you mean by the third."

Eaun suddenly looked old, her warm eyes dulling a little with painful memory, an old, old woman at 11 years of age. Usually, with her bright red hair and seeming flightiness, she fit right in here at Ling Wall. Especially with her ability to eat everything in sight because she was so skinny. She'd made a lot of friends despite her reputation for being the obnoxious 'Champion Toad'.

Miriam saw the sobering change come over the girl. She felt the kind of sad oldness that one feels after out-living all loved ones and is forced to face an uncertain future all alone. Momentarily confused, she looked intently at her fellow Sister-Magum, and saw in Eaun's chestnut eyes an odd expression that exposed the singular realization of the cold and lonely awareness of human mortality that followed all Sisters-Magum throughout their short childhoods.

Eaun sighed. "Long ago I had a dear friend, who was innocent like Jannanine, your little elf. Her name was Alsis Jeffnel, and she was a sweet and sensitive girl with whom I grew up." Her eyes misted.

"She had absolutely no idea of how to fight, nor any inclination to do so or even to think an angry thought. Her true love was sweet literature and beautiful music, and her biggest problem in life was squeezing through a conventional door."

Miriam suddenly relived the frightening moments of Alsis at Borgdragon, crying and begging for her life as the black ones beat her mercilessly with an electronic whip.

Eaun went on without pausing. "You witnessed her death, and it was you who cried for her in my place. For that I'll always be in debt to you." Eaun paused, and Miriam started to speak, but she waved her hand to silence her. "As tough as I am, I didn't want to know what had happened to her . . . I couldn't bear to hear it, although Ruby made me. I don't want the same thing to happen to your innocent little elf, so I'm going to terrorize her into learning to take care of her self. I was too close to Alsis."

Miriam sat completely shaken, and to her, Alsis now took on a new dimension, one that made the fearsome specter of her death more terrible than it had ever been, if that was possible.

Eaun saw the stricken look in her young friend's eyes, and continued. "Alsis was recovered by Ruby as soon as her body died, and she's still with our sacred sisters in Ruby's domain. But it was too late to erase the pain and horror she experienced in that

interrogation room. I've talked with her, and even after these thousands of years, she's still not ready to come out again. She was traumatized so early in her innocence, and is still such a timid soul. Will you let me help you with Jennanine?"

"Oh, yes," Miriam agreed soberly. "I want you to. I know what you say is true, and I want Jenn to grow up enough to have some protection from what's sure to come."

"I'll see you in the morning, then," Eaun nodded, shaking Miriam's hand. "You'll find I'm more than just a champion toad."

Miriam briskly marched Jenn into the cool gymnasium for her second day of drill, having to push the reluctant and protesting little elf along.

As the two entered, Miriam spied Eaun standing at parade rest in the middle of the room, waiting for them. Eaun snapped to attention as they entered and saluted Miriam. "I see you've brought me a new playmate," she smiled.

Miriam nodded. "Jenn, this is Eaun Nuask, who has kindly agreed to be your private instructor for this part of your training," she said coldly. "Say hello to Eaun."

"Hello Eaun," responded Jenn, smiling brightly.

"Hello Jennanine," replied Eaun.

With the introductions finished, Miriam turned to leave. Jenn started to follow her.

"No, Jenn, you're to stay here with your new friend for two hours every morning. You will not leave until I come for you, now good-bye."

Confused and not understanding, Jenn attempted to follow Miriam out, but the door was shut in her face, and she heard the lock turn. Stunned, she slowly turned around and looked at that fearsome monster toad, Eaun.

Eaun beckoned to Jenn with one finger. "Come here, little mouse. We're going to play together," she smiled.

Jenn slowly edged toward her new friend, almost afraid to breathe. Feeling as though she was going to cry, Jenn stopped haltingly in front of the red-haired girl.

"What is your name?" Eaun asked softly.

"Jenn," answered the little elf dutifully.

"No. It is 'Germ'," said Eaun. "And all that germs do is eat and defecate. Now, what's your name?"

"Jenn," answered the little girl, looking solemnly up at Eaun from beneath her long lashes.

Eaun whomped the dumbfounded elf, knocking her down, and the sound of the loud slap resounded through-out the empty gymnasium with sharp echoes.

"Get up, Germ! Up! Or I'll kick the crap out of you!"

Jenn struggled to her feet, her ears ringing from the surprising blow. Starting to cry, she whimpered, "Why did you do that to me, Eaun?"

Her lips tightening, Eaun backhanded Jenn again, the slap sounding even louder. "Shut Up!" she bellowed. "From now on you answer only when I tell you to."

Jenn fought to control her tears, but couldn't. The hot tears streamed down her face, one side of which showed first pale, then, dark red finger marks.

Sighing to herself, Eaun began to put Jenn through some basic drill exercises, which Jenn had forgotten since the previous morning. After a few minutes, she began to step up the pace, pressing the little elf to work harder. Then, as the little recruit began to falter, Eaun kicked her feet out from under her.

"What did I hear you say?" she yelled. "Well Germ? What did you call me?"

"I didn't. . . ."

Another loud slap, "Are you calling me a liar? Eh, Germ? You called me a black one. Isn't that right?"

"No!" cried Jenn.

Another slap, "Who said you could talk?" Eaun sneered, grasping the cowering elf's dark blue hair and pulling her roughly to her feet. "You keep your trap shut until I tell you to talk! Do I make myself clear?"

The bewildering training continued on for months, until Jenn began to get the general idea of what to do and how to do it. Eaun was merciless and accepted nothing short of her best efforts and performance. Jenn came to remember the tall red-haired girl as 'the Butcher of Ling Wall'.

As time went on, Eaun began to teach Jenn defensive fighting techniques and specialized Nashramh exercise disciplines she'd need throughout her life. Jenn responded, but only because she was terrified of Eaun. Whenever Eaun asked her name, Jenn replied, "Germ," and when asked what Germs were good for, she

responded, "eating and defecating." For eight years, she was allowed to say little more to Eaun. Whenever she saw Eaun outside the gymnasium, she hid, afraid the butcher would ask her name and purpose for being alive in front of her friends.

Eaun didn't enjoy having to train the little elf, for she had to be rough about it to get the lessons across. What seemed cruel, such as hitting her, was a punishment for breaking the rules. No matter what Eaun said or accused Jenn of, the little girl wasn't supposed to respond, and if she did she received a slap. The same went for doing less than her very best on every drill. Eaun meant for the little elf to be so terrified that she'd learn everything she was taught. Otherwise, if Jenn got into trouble with enemy agents or others, she'd simply be lost, for she had no idea how to fight back or to take orders. But she would learn by the time Eaun was finished with her.

Miriam was personally relieved that Eaun had taken over this part of Jenn's training. She knew she couldn't take much of the little elf's tears and crying. Hence, while Jenn received her daily workout from Eaun, Miriam practiced her own disciplines in another gymnasium.

Neferah never knew where her two friends went after breakfast, and never asked. Jenn always returned looking worn-out and pale, while Miriam appeared to be in a bad mood. Although she was immensely curious about what the two elves did, she decided it was none of her business. She was still sore from her encounter with Miriam the spring before and wouldn't tangle with Miriam again if she could help it.

As each year passed, the situation on the rimworlds indicated a major enemy incursion, and soon. There was evident rallying of the faithful on thousands of worlds, much as occurred on Lublinog, to produce more raw materials the black ones needed to upgrade their industrial capacity. New worlds, hundreds of them, came under the domination of Samael's forces each year. Societies not long out of the primitive hunter-gatherer stages were being organized into industrial complexes using advanced technologies their citizens didn't fully understand.

Holding these slaves from countless worlds together and controlling their efforts was the myth that Sweet Sargon and his heavenly host were soon to liberate all of the deserving from their

relentless toil. The word was spoken on all of the rimworlds as one: "Sweet Sargon our Saviour is coming!"

Far away from the dominions of Adam Belial, life at Ling Wall was peaceful and rewarding. The children got every encouragement and opportunity to choose the paths of their own destinies, and they were well insulated from the harsh and terrible realities brewing out on the rim.

Those who desired careers in the Nashramh Sisterhood were given pre-entry examinations during their 11th year to determine which of many careers might suit them. Then they could concentrate the remainder of their educations on these areas and take their entry exams during their 19th year, or choose other careers. No pressure was ever exerted to recruit anyone into the sisterhood, and more often than not, a greater emphasis was placed on outside careers. The decision to enter the Nashramh was a serious one, and had to be considered over a number of years.

Both Neferah and Jenn took their examinations when they were 11 years-old, just as Miriam had done the year before. Their reasons for doing so were different. In Neferah's case, it was because her family wanted her to. Jenn just didn't want to be left out. Both girls were found acceptable for career counseling, and received appointments.

Jenn was advised to take more interest in communications, for although very immature, she was extremely bright in two areas. The first was in figuring out cyphers and working with complex numbers. Nitel Glass, her counselor, was so surprised that she had to recheck Jenn's records to be certain she had the right girl. She soon learned that Jenn was a child genius. She had a deep understanding of subtle nuances in complex cyphers, and a phenomenal memory for abstract numerical sequences.

In addition, Jenn could observe and differentiate subtle incidents and draw accurate, well-organized conclusions from them. She was a natural intelligence analyst with a sensitive and fertile imagination.

When Jenn came in for her interview, Nitel Glass sat across from her, her hands folded on her desk in front of her. She watched Jenn for a few moments with narrowed eyes, then began the counseling interview.

For an hour, the girl didn't seem to really understand what Nitel was saying and advising, and nodded her head at everything.

Nitel concluded the interview. Speaking slowly and articulating her words, she said, "Jenn, I realize you didn't hear most of what I've just said, but if you're going to have any kind of career with the Nashramh, you must learn to pay attention!"

She slammed her hand down on her desk, and Jenn snapped out of her pleasant daydream.

Nitel continued. "If the decision were left to me, little girl, you'd never have been allowed to apply for entry into our sisterhood, or to take the pre-entrance tests. You made a serious mistake when you set me up."

Jenn had absolutely no idea what Nitel was talking about, and her eyes widened. Nonetheless, Nitel meant what she said. She knew that Jenn was lying when she accused Miriam of stealing the ginmallows and juice, and she didn't forgive the little elf for putting her in the position of switching a Sister-Magum and making an ass of herself.

"But," she went on, "I don't have the final decision. Therefore you're now in the pre-novice training program. You'll have a lot of growing up to do if you hope to enter the novice phase in eight years."

Jenn still didn't know what was going on, but she was more than happy to leave the counselor's office when dismissed several moments later.

Neferah, too, was exceptional and very mature for her age. Although she was the typical 11-year-old girl, she showed signs of adult maturity and was well-balanced emotionally. Jenn, on the other hand, was expected to have the emotional makeup of a five-year-old at the age of 800, just like any first generation off-world Meszian. Neferah had the makings of a well-rounded leader with strong aptitudes for navigation, situation analysis, and long-range operational thinking. She was earmarked for Fleet Operations staff work, which would eventually place her in a position of real power and responsibility.

When Jenn and Neferah were 18, both were allowed to date boys approved by the academy's counselors. Heline Ness left nothing to chance with respect to her wards. In her opinion, sex was not out, but uncontrolled sex was. Eager young girls could easily get into emotional ties they were unprepared for. Heline had no qualms about being a benevolent dictator - and she was. If one

did not abide by her strict rules, then there would be no boys, and that was that.

Each girl was allowed to date only one boy at a time, and could be personally intimate with him provided it was kept personal and didn't adversely affect her classroom studies and performance. Indiscriminate sexual conduct, however, was forbidden, as was a long list of negative and self-destructive practices.

No one ever found Heline's rules unfair, and there were few infractions. These, if they occurred, were dealt with professionally by Heline's special counselors, and were never repeated.

During their teenage years, Jenn and Neferah grew into happy, outgoing girls. Both were, by the standards of their respective races, considered exceptionally beautiful. Jenn's dark blue eyes were the most outstanding feature of her pixie-like face, and they always sparkled mischievously. She wore her deep blue hair about shoulder length where it curled at the ends. She had a slight, petite figure, and looked good in everything she wore.

Neferah had grown into a beauty as well. Her shining black hair was short and combed back at the sides which, with her tan skinned feline face with large black eyes framed by long black lashes, made her look even younger and more vulnerable than she really was. She had a ready smile that made men turn their heads. She was small for her race, being only 1.7 meters tall with a lean, willowy figure which she emphasized by wearing straight and streamlined clothes.

Miriam too had grown into a vivacious 19 year-old, although she usually kept to herself and didn't date. She wasn't considered attractive for her race, for she was lean and her face had a slightly hawkish look to it that would take on hollows when she was older. She wore her dark red hair short in a style that kept it off her forehead. Her deep red eyes, which drooped a little and seemed soulful, were softly deep and knowing. She had a normal petite figure common to elves, and preferred to dress simply.

Although emotionally immature compared to her class-mates, Jenn progressed beyond Nitel Glass' expectations. She still had the emotional makeup of a 10-year-old, but this was exceptional since elves from her world were as innocent and naive as four or five-year-old children, even when they'd lived for hundreds of years. However, Jenn learned a great deal about communications, both in her field of study and in interpersonal relations. Although her

thought processes were quite simple, she could organize them into a coherent form useful for writing and expressing ideas within the area of her career studies. This was a direct result of her daily lessons with Eaun Nuask and Miriam, which shaped her as no Low Elf had ever been shaped before. She became an expert in many of the advanced Nashramh Shambu and Shamboni techniques, thanks to Eaun, and mastered a certain degree of self-discipline.

Jenn's physical education was enhanced by another two hours of private instruction with Miriam at the special education facility's computer complex. She was well-appraised of far-off events and viewed the enemy in action. Miriam also taught her five languages, three of them used by the black ones, and after eight years of this private instruction, Jenn became proficient in their grammar and special applications. The elf was at home with this type of education, and caught on quickly. This made her an asset to Miriam in her own activities.

Miriam found the tradeoff a good one, for while she trained Jenn in the ways of adults, Jenn taught her a great deal about the vivid imagination and realities of the innocent.

Miriam also took Neferah under her wing, teaching her the Shamboni and Shambu disciplines for three years. One day Neferah was reading about the regimens, and when she asked Miriam about them, the elf offered to teach her what she knew. She didn't regret this. Neferah proved to be an apt and willing student who progressed as far as Jenn had, all within the three years.

The little Tzian had no illusions about reality like Jenn did; as she grew older, she began to study far-off events on her own and knew deep within herself that she had to learn all she could to grow in the Nashramh. Miriam found her to have an almost limitless well of self-discipline, and because of this, she helped Neferah learn a great deal about the Nashramh, including one of the secret battle languages.

Rehim Oson stopped Miriam in the hallway between classes. "Say, Miriam, could I interest you in meeting a young man who's from your home world of Meszhiah?"

Miriam smiled. "I didn't know there were any around. Who is he?"

"His name is Neftalak B'Mesziah, and he's a High Elf attending the Wosomon Academy, over by the Socowill township." Rehim smiled. "Oh! By the way, he's a dream, a real dream!"

"I'd like to meet this Mr. Neftalak B'Mesziah," Miriam laughed. "I've never met a dream before."

"Oh, I thought you would," Rehim chuckled, "so I took the liberty of inviting him to lunch tomorrow afternoon at the counselor's cafeteria. And, by the way, he knows all about you too."

Miriam laughed. "All right, I'll be there." She was interested in meeting a male elf firsthand.

Neftalak sat talking with Rehim and two other counselors when Miriam entered the lunchroom. She was dressed in her Ling Wall uniform and still carrying her books; she walked gracefully over to the table.

Noticing the elf making her way towards the table, Neftalak noted that she was handsome for a High Elf, but not what he considered good-looking. Her soft eyes stood out the most, and he felt that they looked right into and through him.

Miriam stopped, bowed slightly, and announced, "I'm Miriam B'Mesziah, and I take it you're Mister Neftalak B'Mesziah?" She looked calmly at him, noting his elfish good looks.

Neftalak rose to his feet and bowed, replying, "It's truly good to meet you, Miriam, and yes, I'm Neftalak. Please join us." He remained standing until she'd seated herself.

Neftalak didn't know why, but he took an immediate dislike to this Miriam.

Settling his chin in his hand, he mused that it was probably her eyes. He'd never liked people, especially women, who seemed so damned superior, and she appeared to be very sure of herself.

As Miriam joined the group, she inwardly agreed with Rehim's taste; Neftalak was very good-looking for an elf, almost beautiful. He was taller and stockier than the normal for High Elves, and had wavy black hair and dark blue eyes. One thing was obvious to her; they had little in common, and she sensed that he felt uneasy about her. She realized he was young and impressionable, if not a bit insecure. Other than that, he was exceptionally handsome and charmingly polished in both his manners and conversation. She could see the naval training he'd received.

After a pleasant, leisurely lunch, the two elves shook hands and agreed to meet again sometime in the near future. Miriam had to leave to make it to her next class.

Miriam mused that it was a rather revealing lunch. Neftalak had absolutely nothing to be insecure about, yet in subtle ways he'd been playing a game of one-upmanship. She couldn't put her finger on it, but in his smooth and polished way, he'd delivered several subtle put-downs; not so much by what he said, but by how he said it and looked at her. Miriam could tell he didn't like her, and suspected he wouldn't try to contact her again.

Much to her surprise, Miriam heard from Neftalak a week later, when he asked her to accompany him to a semiformal supper at the Wosomon Academy Officer's Club. She couldn't accept, however. She was committed to a special conference with several Sisters-Magum over the Interspace Communications Network that evening.

"I'm really sorry, Neftalak," she said over the comm-link. "Unfortunately I'm committed to a study conference with my test counselor on Nashon evening."

Then, after a moment's hesitation, she added, "If you're strapped for a female escort, I have a lovely friend who is also from Meszhiah. Her name is Jennanine, and she's just about to turn 19. Would that be of any help?"

Neftalak quickly agreed, with obvious relief in his voice, and thanked Miriam for her help. He suggested that he would meet Jenn at the Ling Wall administration building at 18:00 hours on Nashon evening.

Neftalak breathed a sigh of relief as soon as he hung up. He was glad Miriam couldn't attend. He'd asked her as a last recourse because he needed an elf as a partner for formality. She still made him feel uneasy. Those damn eyes. . . .

As Miriam hung up, she had the distinct feeling that, from his ready acceptance of an alternate date, he'd asked her to accompany him only as a-last-minute recourse.

Smiling, Miriam mused that Jenn would love to meet such a charmingly handsome elf and be wined and dined.

When Jenn learned of her blind date, she had a feeling that Miriam was lying to her for the first time. If this Neftalak was so handsome, Miriam would be going out with him herself!

Jenn reluctantly agreed just so she wouldn't hurt Miriam's feelings. And anyway, she'd always been so busy she had never dated before, so it should be fun. Especially if she could get all dressed up!

"Ginger," she announced to her doll before she left for her date, "you see before you Jenn the femme-fatale, the belle of the ball. Miriam's warty friend is in for a surprise."

Neftalak arrived early and stood alone in the beautifully decorated lobby of Ling Wall's administration building. A number of girls entered after he arrived and ogled the handsome young man wearing a naval cadet's uniform, giggling into their hands as they passed. Several even made a second trip through the lobby to admire this really gorgeous guy.

Neftalak smiled; it was nice to be so attractive to girls. He'd never lacked dates. Tonight he wore his dark grey naval uniform with gold cadet insignia, braid, and polished gray shoes.

Shortly after 18:00 hours, Neftalak noted a lone figure entering through the lobby door. He smiled, musing that it was too bad she wasn't his date. "Now she's special."

Then as the girl gracefully moved closer, he fell in love with her at first sight. She was small and petite, and had the most angelic features he'd ever seen, framed by shoulder-length black - no, blue - hair gently swept back with dark gold comb shells. She wore a simple white satin dress with royal blue glitter and slits up the sides, showing well-shaped legs. The dress came up to her long throat in a flat collar with a small slit designed to enhance the imagination, not take it away, "God, why can't it be her."

"Are you Neftalak B'Mesziah?" the lovely creature asked in a sparkling voice.

Neftalak nearly lost his composure, "You're Jenn?"

Jenn looked at him breathlessly, seeing that he was indeed good looking - no, gorgeous - and wondered why he was flushed and having trouble breathing. Becoming alarmed, she answered. "Yes. Is something wrong?" Her dark blue eyes grew large and doe-like.

"Not a thing!" answered Neftalak, breaking out into a broad grin. "I am Cadet Neftalak B'Mesziah of the Wosomon Academy, and I've just fallen in love."

Jenn thought he was kidding, but she didn't care. Neftalak was the greatest dream elf in the whole galaxy and she just knew she

was in love with him. When he stepped forward and took her arm, she nearly fainted.

The evening was a success beyond all expectations, and the two became inseparable friends and sweethearts from that night on. They were truly in love.

When Jenn returned home at 25:00 hours, Miriam was up, waiting for her and reading some literature from the Chasmalim. As soon as the starry-eyed elf floated through the door, she asked, "Well Jenn how was your blind date?"

"I'm in love! I'm in love," sang Jenn. "Oh, God, I'm in love!"

Miriam laughed, pleased to see Jenn so happy. "In love, yes, but did you have a good time and did you wear clean underwear?"

Jenn swooned on her bed, and holding Ginger above her, sang "I'm in love, in love, in love."

Chapter 7

Klikah-Lal

As the prospect of an enemy invasion came closer, we too had preparations to make . . . long-term military investments going beyond the upcoming battle. Any military leader worth his or her salt must plan for the logistics of future operations, or there won't be any. . . .

We aren't alone in our future planning and military outreach programs . . . yes, there are others . . . the Ansharim, for instance. . . .

07:15-15 MAREN 6130-7N5

The month of Maren was special to Jenn in her whirlwind love affair. She and Neftalak were graduating from their respective academies, and both would be going off to different colleges for the next five years.

Jenn improved her studies over the past eight years, and it looked as if she'd passed her examinations. She'd qualified for the Holblinel Communications Institute, 2,000 kilometers from the Ling Wall campus. Neftalak was assigned to the Group IV-B of the Con-Fed Naval Academy, located at the Con-Fed Fleet Facility for the Sanistole Section on Tirinoe III, some six light years distant.

The two saw each other every weekend and whenever else was possible for more than four months. Jenn felt as though she was living in a dream, and her heart floated on clouds whenever she was with Neftalak. When she couldn't seem to please Eaun or Miriam, thinking about Neftalak immediately made her feel better.

Even though Jenn walked around in a lovesick cloud most of the time, her grades didn't slip. In fact, they became better than ever before. Miriam couldn't understand it, since Jenn thought

about Neftalak most of the time. However, contrary to normal expectations, she was more receptive to what she learned and soaked it all up, like a sponge. For this reason alone Miriam kept completely out of Jenn's love life, although she didn't personally care for Neftalak.

Now time was running out for Jenn and Neftalak. In one week she'd receive the results of her final examinations, then, have her confirmation interview for her new assignment. A week after that, she'd graduate with all the special festivities reserved for this wonderful time in her life.

Jenn should have been happy, but something nagged at her. Neftalak was scheduled to leave for his assignment one day before her special confirmation interview. Unfortunately, he was leaving in the early evening, when Jenn was supposed to be studying with Miriam.

Neftalak graduated at the head of his class, and in addition to the usual commissioning and graduation ceremony, he and four other young men of note were invited to attend a formal supper for additional awards and words of advice.

Jenn fervently wished she could attend Neftalak's graduation supper, but he smiled and said this was men's business. Jenn pouted prettily, not comprehending, and said, "I'll be as quiet as a mouse. Oh, please, Neftalak, I want to be there with you."

Laughing, Neftalak had pulled her down on the bed and kissed her.

Jenn would survive missing the graduation, but she would be damned if she'd miss Neftalak's departure three nights later.

On the morning of the day Neftalak was to report to his transit vessel, Jenn finally made her decision. She brought up the subject to Miriam during breakfast.

She spoke hesitantly. "Miriam, I've just made a decision about our evening training sessions together. I'm going to stop them as of today, and that goes for working out with Eaun too. Neftalak is leaving tonight for his new assignment, and I intend to spend the day with him and see him off at the spaceport tonight. With time as short as it is, I simply cannot continue the training sessions."

Jenn hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. No matter what Miriam said, she wasn't going to those stupid sessions anymore. It was time that Miriam understood she was grown-up now, and could do exactly as she pleased.

Miriam waited patiently until Jenn finished. "Is this more important than preparing for your career? There's much more to learn and such a short time in which to learn it."

Privately, she was unhappy that Jenn had made this decision, and Miriam knew it would be useless to talk her out of it. But at least the little elf had stood up for what she wanted, as an adult would, and not as a child.

"No!" exclaimed Jenn. "I don't care about rimworld politics anymore. Besides, you and Eaun don't own me. Neftalak has never hurt me and wants only the best for me. He said you should butt out or he'd get into the act!" Jenn was flushed, and her heart pounded when she saw Miriam's eyes take on a burning glow.

"Have you told him what I've been teaching you?" Miriam asked softly, her voice suddenly cold. She wondered if Neftalak had any idea of the consequences of butting into her business. He didn't have the slightest idea what would happen to him for such a blunder.

Jenn felt close to tears, just as she always had when she was a child and something wrong occurred. She should have known something like this would happen. But, she bravely stuck to her stand.

"No. Only that you make me study my lessons with you and that you control my time. I wouldn't tell him or anyone else about Nashramh secrets," she declared resolutely. "I know how to keep my word."

Miriam looked at Jenn for a few moments, then, finished her breakfast without replying; there was nothing more to say. The lessons were now ended.

Afterwards, the two left the dining hall, walking slowly, but with a strained silence between them. Jenn hoped Miriam wouldn't be mad at her for long. After all, how could she? Neftalak always made her happy, and Miriam said she wanted her to be happy.

Jenn decided Miriam wouldn't be mad for long, and that later she'd understand just why she had to make this vital decision. But she was still unhappy that Miriam wouldn't even talk to her.

Without speaking, Miriam turned the corner and continued walking toward the Special Education Facility to work out. Jenn went silently back to her room.

As Miriam began her warm-ups, she thought about this new wrinkle with Neftalak. Infatuation was one thing, but this 'dream

elf was getting out of hand with Jenn, and he had threatened to interfere in affairs that were none of his business. She could thoroughly understand Jenn's need for the young man, especially when war threatened her very future. Miriam remembered when she herself had been with Ben Condon so many years ago, when the rest of the galaxy hadn't existed for her - only Ben. Yet, she'd remembered her duty to the Nashramh, and here Jenn just seemed to want to forget all about her commitments.

Yet, reflecting on her own shortcomings, Miriam realized that Jenn had acted as an adult in the matter, even if her decision would only benefit her in the short run. She was just unhappy with the entire situation and with this Neftalak, who had some idea about dominating sweet-tempered Jenn. While Jenn seemed happy enough about it, his immature attitudes would, in the long run, affect Jenn's future, and possibly her career. What a mess!

Yet, did Jenn really want a career in the Sisterhood? Had she committed herself to a future of loyalty and service, or did she simply wish to please Miriam? Perhaps Jenn needed a chance, now that she could survive alone, to decide what she really wanted for herself.

After all, persuasion with the best of intentions was nowhere as lasting as personnel commitment.

Forget it Miriam your childhood must end now

The voice in her head made her snap to attention, for it was so loud that at first she thought someone else was in the room. Then she realized it was Ruby's voice as it came to her in her dreams. This was the first time she'd ever heard Ruby's voice outside of a face-to-face conversation or while in deep meditation.

Stopping her warm-ups, Miriam sat still on the gymnasium floor and relaxed, placing her mind in a meditation mode so she could focus her attention on Ruby and Council Central.

"What is it you mean, Ruby?" she asked as Ruby's outline appeared before her mind's eye.

"Simply this, Miriam, this evening, both you and Eaun will leave Ling Wall for special duty out on the seventh-arm of our galaxy. You will speak to no one other than Heline Ness about your plans to leave. When you go to her office, she will supply you with your clothing and weapons. I will discuss the details of your assignments with you and Eaun once you are space borne."

Ruby paused for a moment, a smile spreading across her face. "Oh, by the way, our little elf child, Jenn, has finally gotten some backbone and stood up to you . . . that's good, maybe she will grow faster than we suspected."

Miriam nodded, a little sadly.

Ruby continued. "I know you're unhappy with the situation, which on the surface seems petty and unimportant. I sense you feel Neftalak is good for Jenn in many ways now, but that he won't carry through because of inherent insecurities. Remember, each person must make his or her own decisions, no matter how unenlightened. Be happy that Jenn is still young and free enough to make her own decisions. All of us in the Nashramh must make our own mistakes to learn to survive. . . ."

Again Miriam nodded silently, and the two went on to discuss the volatile situation on the rimworlds for an hour; Eaun joined in on the conversation from her own gymnasium. She expressed no surprise that Jenn had decided to end her lessons, but also remarked that the little elf was gaining the courage to stand up for herself.

"I think," Eaun said seriously, "Jennanine has learned enough of our Shamboni and Shambu essentials to survive on her own until she matures enough to want to further her training."

Miriam and Eaun were updated on galactic news. More rimworlds were caught under the enemy's sway. This was no surprise, but there was a new twist. Intelligence suggested the second invasion of Belial's legions would begin very soon, perhaps within the next century. The enemy had spent over 10,000 years regrouping and licking his wounds since the losses of his three prime fortresses and Sweet Gensargon. Since the day of reckoning would soon be here with a major invasion, all Magums were needed for operations in the field. There were far too few to go around.

As they ended their discussion, both girls agreed to make their way to Heline's office as soon as the conference was over. As Miriam left her gym to meet Eaun, she briefly thought of Jenn and regretted that she was leaving without saying good-bye.

Heline Ness had by now developed a comfortable paunch and all the soft fat that come with old age to her race. Her face, however, retained its matronly beauty and often erupted into tiny wrinkles when she smiled. She smiled now as she sat behind her

desk, awaiting the arrival of Miriam and Eaun, and the smile spread to her chestnut eyes, which were the exact shade of her short graying hair.

Heline had their equipment ready and the requisite travel documents to cover their movements. After all, the two graduates were transferring to an engineering school on Sebo Station. At least that was the cover story. Since both were Magums, they were desperately needed for deep space probe duty and she too expected to be transferred soon. Heline was looking forward to meeting Miriam after all of these years. She knew from the school's records that Miriam loved it here at Ling Wall and the elf enjoyed a very good childhood, an experience well worth remembering, except of course for her corporal punishment for the ginmallo fiasco. But that was past, and if she knew Miriam, it was all forgotten. Heline smiled to herself again and nodded with contentment.

After several minutes, Miriam and Eaun entered the office and closed the door behind them. Heline stood up, her broad smile lighting up her motherly face, and embraced Miriam in a warm hug. Miriam returned the hug and clapped her on the back.

"Oh, it's so good to see such an old friend again," Heline said happily, "even if it's only for a short time."

Miriam agreed heartily. Turning to Eaun, she said, "Eaun, I want you to meet my very old friend, Sister-Magum Heline Ness. Heline, this is Sister-Magum Eaun Nuask."

Heline shook hands with the slender girl who had short carrot-red hair and warm brown eyes. The three sat down for an early lunch and some warm discussion. Miriam laughingly remembered her first meeting with Eaun, and all three chuckled at the memory of five-year-old Magums.

After lunch, they talked together for an hour and a half while the two girls cleaned up and dressed in their new uniforms. Eaun donned her complete black uniform of underwear, jumpsuit, boots, the short jacket and skirt over the jumpsuit, finishing with her beanie. Miriam dressed in only the jumpsuit uniform. She then put on her beanie, carefully packed her skirt and jacket in the large tote-purse, along with her five changes of underwear. Afterwards, the two girls checked their equipment and put their fiber lasers in holsters hidden in their uniforms.

Eaun had never dealt with Heline before, and she was impressed by the older woman's outlook on life and her softly

disguised toughness. Miriam told them what happened to her when she and Heline parted on the Odomak destroyer, 'Cardinel', so many centuries ago, and both laughed about her time in the vessel's brig.

It turned out that Heline and her group, who'd escaped on one of the destroyer's two lifeboats, crash-landed on a primitive world several light years away. It was the only world in the immediate area which showed any promise for survival.

Upon attempting to land safely on this raw world, which Heline referred to as 'Irk', something in the turbulent atmosphere caused the ship's gyros to overload, and the ship crashed violently into one of the vast swamps; Irk was about 90 percent swamp.

Heline slowed when she told this part of her tale, and Miriam saw that it saddened her. "Everyone survived the crash, for we were all strapped in, and the ship wasn't going very fast. We got most of our survival gear out before the shuttle sank, but unfortunately most of our food went down with it."

Heline's eyes took on a glow, and Miriam could feel a chill, almost a damp chill, close in around her as the older woman spoke in a soft, droning voice. "The nights there were horrible, for I could feel something in the murky swamp . . . something primeval, cyclopean. What it was I can't say, but it frightened me." She smiled, a grim smile, looking at Miriam. "Now, I'm not afraid of monsters, or of things that go bump in the night, but this . . . this thing, I could sense was huge and very, very old. I guess that was what bothered me most . . . it was as though whatever it was had been there since the very beginning of that planet's evolution. I cannot describe the feeling it gave me without making it sound like a nightmare. I do suspect that whatever life was there, was primitive and of low intelligence. Still, I couldn't shake off the feeling that it bore malice and would one night sweep us all into the swamp with it. It was like a watcher."

Heline shook herself, "Enough of that. Anyway, we made emergency shelters and lived in them, surviving off of the few rations we had and some plant life that scanned as edible."

Heline went on to describe how every one of the 800 survivors died from tropical diseases, which ate at them like cancers . . . slowly and painfully. Heline had kept the three centimeter-long archive crystal bar in her mouth for 10 long years, and was the last to die; all of her hair had fallen out, while she was covered

with painful running ulcers which wouldn't heal. Somehow she held out and maintained the archive, which was found inside her skull 600 years later. The second lifeboat hadn't found planet fall and was discovered floating lifelessly in the void 60 years after it was launched. All hands had perished from suffocation when the vessel's secondary propulsion generator ruptured and flooded the craft with nitrogen gas.

After this horrible ordeal, Heline was given command of a scout destroyer, then, assigned to several other major posts. This time around she was assigned to her present position as the Nashramh Liaison and Director of Ling Wall Academy. She loved her job here, but now things were speeding up and she too, would be assigned to the rim during the upcoming hostilities.

The girls stayed in Heline's quarters, which were located next to her office, until evening, discussing the state of affairs out on the rim over supper. Then, all too soon, they had to leave for Hakmal Spaceport. They boarded a transit freighter which was taking passengers and commercial items to Memot VI, a yellow sun with six major planets in orbit around it.

The freighter was a short-run vessel measuring only 1,900 meters long and 180 meters wide. Miriam didn't notice the name because both she and Eaun were preoccupied with their new assignments. Once space borne, both remained in their joint quarters while they conversed with Ruby about the nature of their missions.

Both were being assigned to Nashramh deep probe scout destroyers which were heading out into enemy-infested space. Both would be communications officers, an absolute necessity on long-range missions. Neither vessel had a Magum on board. Instant communications had to be maintained with Council Central on all these deep space probes.

Both destroyers waited just hours away at a predetermined rendezvous for the transfer. No time was being wasted, for the enemy was on the move.

At exactly 26:18 hours, the transit freighter broke into temporal space. With a minimum of effort and trouble, the two girls were transferred to their respective destroyers in a lifeboat. The freighter dropped back into the sub-binary after only eight minutes.

Miriam was the first to board her assigned vessel, the Class I scout destroyer 'SD Klikah-Lal'; the warship measured only 600

meters long and 100 meters wide. She was sleek, although several long burn marks on her hull showed she'd seen action not too long ago.

As she prepared to leave the lifeboat, Miriam turned to Eaun and shook hands with her. "Good hunting, my friend, and thank you for helping me with my little elf."

Eaun's eyes never blinked. "I'll miss you and our Jennanine. Take care of yourself, and good hunting."

Saluting, Miriam turned to face the Klikah's duty officer, "Permission to come aboard?"

"Permission granted," smiled the tough looking woman.

Miriam entered, not looking back. She was not to see either Eaun or Jenn for many years to come.

Her childhood had ended.

Sister-Captain Yee Ochs met Miriam on the Klikah's bridge. "So you're my new communications officer," she smiled after introducing herself. "And I take it you've just completed school," she noted Miriam's freshly scrubbed, youthful features.

Yee was an attractive woman of 300 years, with prematurely graying brown hair and a cheerful disposition. She was slightly built and stood a little taller than Miriam. Her warm hazel eyes looked dead tired, although she moved and spoke with precision and an air of well-founded command.

"Yes, I have," responded Miriam. "I'm Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah and I'll be serving as both your communications officer and Admiralty Liaison."

Yee looked startled, then, broke out in a happy grin. "Thank the Eternal, do we need you!" she exclaimed, shaking Miriam's hand vigorously. "Well, it looks like we're back in business again. Welcome aboard, Miriam. Welcome aboard indeed!"

Yee was relieved. With a Magum on board, the Klikah could do what she was designed for - go out there and really snoop around. She talked with Miriam for several minutes, then, had her shown, to her billet. Miriam grew accustomed to her new surroundings, and the entire crew of 34 made pilgrimages to welcome her aboard.

"And so young and tender a Magum," hissed the astro-navigator-doctor, who looked reptilian but who was warm-blooded. Her name was Quorib B'Nussoh, and she liked the new communications officer immediately.

Never blinking her wide yellow eyes, she urged, "You must consume tea with me," in her hissing, yet soothing voice. "And share with me your warmth of spirit." She smiled her lipless toothy smile and patted Miriam softly on the shoulder. "I will tell you of my beautiful world Nussoh, my world of green leaves and flowing streams. You will joy in my telling."

Miriam immediately felt an odd kinship to this lovely navigator with unblinking reptilian eyes. She was so gentle and eager to share herself without reservation. Miriam replied gladly that she loved tea and warm company and would relish her friendship.

Miriam settled into the daily life aboard the Klikah easily. Everyone was required to wear an environmental uniform and a sidearm at all times, even when sleeping. The particular type of uniform they wore was much different from what Miriam had worn on the 'Gale Robel'. The one-piece black uniform was close-fitting without being restrictive, and the boots and gloves were attached. If the vessel lost either pressure or its entire atmosphere, the uniform, which retained small caches of atmospheric gases, immediately swelled and hardened on contact with the cold of space. The black boots were worn over the footings of the uniform, and the thin gloves, which also reacted accordingly to space, were strapped over against each wrist, ready to be pulled on at a second's notice. The headgear, tight fitting and with special lenses, was strapped to the left shoulder. Miriam could pull it on when general quarters sounded. Sister-Captain Yee Ochs ran a tight ship and intended to be prepared for anything and everything. Even the weapons systems were charged and primed 30 hours a day, always ready for instant combat.

Miriam was at first uncomfortable about always having to wear the rectifier gear. After several days, however, she grew accustomed to it.

Shortly after boarding, Miriam received the cook's tour of the vessel, once Yee made their heading and the Klikah dropped into the sub-binary.

Yee chattered proudly about her ship. She'd been the captain for nearly 80 years, and had pulled the vessel out of several major skirmishes without heavy losses. "The Klikah is equipped with the latest and best operational and weapons systems in our fleet," Yee told her. "Our advanced Robel drives enhance both our speed and

operational range. Unfortunately I cannot disclose to you the true speed since it is top secret."

"I already know those details," Miriam answered with a smile. "All Magums are apprised of those data. Besides that, I was on the Gale Robel when we discovered the secret."

Yee stopped short. "So . . . you're that Miriam, I know what happened to you and the rest of the crew. Nothing comes for free, it seems."

Miriam nodded, musing that this Yee Ochs was much more than she looked, with all of the knowledge and data she possessed. She wasn't a Magum, but perhaps she was close to it.

The two continued their tour, getting to know one another in the process. Both learned to like and respect the other over the course of their association on this voyage, and became fast friends.

* * *

Jenn saw Neftalak off at the spaceport, all the while wondering how she'd ever live on without him. Just outside the transit freighter, the two embraced, Jenn with tears in her eyes.

"Jenn," murmured Neftalak, his own eyes glistening. "I love you like no one I've ever known, and I want you to be my wife when we've finished our educations and can marry. Will you marry me?" He tilted her head up by her chin.

Jenn broke out in tears, clinging to him as if she couldn't bear to let go, and promised she'd wait forever for him and that there would be no other. "I love you so much, Neftalak," she cried, begging him to take her with him. To hell with the rest of the galaxy, only Neftalak mattered.

"You know I can't, Jenn, but I'll call you every chance I get." Neftalak hugged her tightly, and Jenn snuggled into his long black overcoat. Then she looked up and nodded; she truly loved him and knew that she would think of him every moment until they came together in marriage.

The last call for boarding came, and Neftalak reluctantly pushed Jenn away gently, wishing that the rest of the galaxy didn't exist. After kissing her tenderly, he turned and boarded the vessel without looking back. The ship's purser noticed the handsome elf's shoulders shaking as Neftalak passed through the ship's airlock.

Jenn stood for a long time after the transit freighter lifted off, remembering the past months with Neftalak. They'd gone by so

swiftly, too swiftly, and she loved every moment with him. It was as if he'd breathed life into her when they first kissed. And as her lover, he'd been so gentle and considerate, wanting her pleasure before his.

As Jenn turned and began her lonely trek back to Ling Wall and her friends, she thought about all the times she'd gone to his private room, when he'd pulled her down on his bed, petting and kissing her. He'd slipped her clothes off, exploring all the time. That was great, as were the times when he'd surprise her by sneaking up behind her, and after planting small kisses on the back of her neck, pick her up and dance around with her in his strong arms. Jenn nourished herself on these happy memories, for it looked as though they were all she had left. They'd both loved every moment of their times together and their love-making. She could think of little else until they met again.

Smiling, Jenn wondered what marriage would be like. Would they make love every day? She hoped so.

Jenn's smile faded. She wished fervently that she could share her wonderful feelings and experiences with Miriam, but her friend just didn't seem overly fond of Neftalak, and preferred not to discuss him with her. Jenn figured Miriam was either jealous or just didn't want her to be happy. All Miriam seemed to expect was for Jenn to study, study, study.

Unknown to Jenn, Miriam saw the kernels of insecurity within Neftalak that could later rise up to hurt Jenn. He never treated Jenn badly, but he made sour references about Miriam, whom he did not like at all. Miriam sensed he might tire of a loving, clinging girl like Jenn.

Jenn's forehead wrinkled and she frowned, about to cry. Why had Miriam treated her this way? She didn't want to have to choose between her and Neftalak . . . she just couldn't; both were too important to her. Jenn knew something was up since she hadn't seen Miriam since morning, nor had Neferah. Miriam hadn't attended lunch or supper, or even her recreation class with Neferah.

Weeks later, Jenn still couldn't believe Miriam could be so angry with her for sticking up for her own rights - and just walk away. She hadn't even said so much as goodbye or attended Jenn's and Neferah's graduation as she planned. She'd just left.

Jenn felt an empty spot in her breast and in the pit of her stomach when she thought about the situation. She loved Miriam as much as she loved Neftalak, although in a different way. Miriam was closer to her than anyone else in her whole life had been, even Neferah.

Oddly, now that she thought about Miriam's strange absence, Jenn remembered that she hadn't seen Eaun since that day either. She had feared Eaun would track her down and kick the crap out of her for not showing up for her physical training that morning. Eaun had disappeared too.

Now Jenn had no one left to watch over her, not even Neferah, who was going to the same school she was. Neferah didn't know much more about life than she did. All she really had to look forward to was her marriage to Neftalak, and she didn't know how she could stand being without him for so long.

Less than two hours after the transit freighter dropped into the sub-binary, it returned to the temporal with an odd bump. Neftalak switched on the mirror-screen in his cabin and turned to an outside channel. As the screen swirled and focused, bright myriads of gleaming stars filled its surface. He noted two sleek military-type vessels he didn't recognize lying just off the starboard stern of the freighter. One ship showed burn marks on her hull indicating she'd been in a fight. From the side of his screen, he saw a craft approach the freighter, and after only a few minutes, speed away again. The transit freighter then began to move forward for a few moments and suddenly dropped into the sub-binary. His mirror-screen clouded for about 30 seconds and then refocused on the odd shapes of distorted starfields as viewed from his moving ship. Somebody had transferred from the freighter to the military vessels or possibly the other way around. He wondered who they were.

* * *

For six years, the Klikah-Lal moved deep into the seventh-arm rim sector of the galaxy. She surveyed 18 star systems and recorded the progress of the black enemy in the area. It appeared that Belial's forces weren't as numerous here as on the outer rim of the sixth-arm. But they were here nonetheless.

Yee successfully avoided any direct confrontations with enemy-affiliated forces, but had come close . . . too close for comfort, about half a dozen times. Miriam now understood why the woman's eyes looked so tired; she literally lived on the bridge or in the ship's situation room, and she never let her guard down. This was how she kept her ship free of trouble in these uncharted regions of the galaxy.

Miriam soon learned there were other warships in this sector too. These were from a strange, male-dominated society from the galaxy's first arm, which Ruby called the Ansharim Brotherhood. For some reason, this name stirred deep memories in Miriam's inner mind, saddening her with nostalgic feelings she couldn't grasp.

One evening, in her sleep, Miriam discussed this brotherhood at length with Ruby.

"The Ansharim," Ruby said in her soft, eloquent voice, "has been seeding the seventh-arm of our galaxy for many centuries, especially near the rim, with hardy groups of 'pioneer' teams, some of which are made up of Odomaks."

Miriam didn't quite understand this. "What do you mean by seeding?"

"Well, the Gamma-B's, or B-intellects, of the pioneers are transported from their home worlds or operational Rim Area Defense Stations to primitive and uncharted planets for long-term pioneering and colonization. The personnel are, of course, well-briefed on their missions beforehand, and are specially trained for their parts in the operation. Once on the new world, they all, in time, enter into the corporeal bodies of whatever advanced life forms dominate the planet and begin the arduous project of shaping the world's population for admittance into the Ansharim's Proctorate. In essence, they do just what the black ones do. They influence the world's population so it will grow to understand and experience civilization and technology. But they do this only so these worlds can protect themselves from the black ones. So, while they do influence the population in many ways, it's for a good purpose which will, in the end, protect the rights and freedom of that population."

Miriam learned this was about all that was known about the project, although she sensed there was more to it. Since not much

was known about the enterprise, she was instructed to pay close attention to anything that might show up in the ship's surveys.

As Miriam finished her late breakfast, general quarters sounded with shrill klaxons. Rising quickly, she pulled her facemask over her head and peeled her gloves on. She made for the situation room, dodging other personnel who ran for their battle stations.

All the Klikah's internal yellow lights blinked out, and were replaced by red chem-lights. After two minutes, the klaxons shut off, giving enough time for weapons control to check all systems, which registered green. Dish antennas outside the Klikah's hull revolved slowly, scanning for precise information on the enemy's presence, and within, the weapons systems rosters and graphs indicated each section was fully charged. Every section was ready for action.

In the situation room, Miriam learned that the long range UV optical probe was locked in on an odd light source some 265.803 kilometers off port bow.

On the bridge, Yee studied the distant speck on her high-gain gridscreen overlay. Frowning, she noted that it appeared to be a derelict, but something nagged at the back of her mind.

"CIC, get a spectrometer analysis on that UV source!"

After a few moments, the CIC recorder called out, "It's a 250 cycle 'A' with an impulse of 3.5 seconds."

"Check that against fleet signals and special ID codes," Yee spoke crisply, studying the tiny spot on her screen as if it were about to disappear.

"Bingo!" exclaimed the CIC recorder after a few minutes. "It reads out as an A.B. distress signal, and our response should be given in 235 Cycle 'A' with an impulse of 4.1 seconds."

Yee considered the report and directed her next question to Miriam, who sat at her console in the situation room. "Communications, could you check out Council Central on that and ask their advice?"

"Acknowledged," Miriam responded, and after a few moments, reported, "GCR instructs us to make contact with the source and to proceed cautiously. We are to report any resulting information immediately."

Yee watched the screen for about five minutes as the Klikah moved slowly toward the object. Absentmindedly gripping the arms of her control chair, she ordered, "Weapons sections one and two,

prepare to fire torpedo canisters in a four degree spread of ten. Gunner, remove all safety controls from your case banks. Deadman, remove your recoil pin and activate your switch."

After each section confirmed her orders, Yee continued. "Signals flash a response per CIC instructions."

"Yes, Captain," came an answer over the comm-link, which hissed a little. Yee shifted in her chair, wondering if they were falling into a nice neat little trap.

After about 40 minutes of relaying their UV signal, a subtle change came over the distant object. It appeared to stop spinning and to stabilize itself.

Immediately, the Klikah's central dish communications scrambler indicated a narrow energy beam directed at her from the distant object. Yee spoke clearly and quickly. "Lock in on that communications beam."

Miriam locked onto the signal, beaming it to the bridge. A masculine voice, taut with tension or pain, called out, "Please identify yourselves. This is TU-one-zero-six-one 'Tibot'. Please identify yourselves. This is TU-one-zero-six-one Tibot"

CIC reported, "Captain, that's a brotherhood signal. It appears on our special signals roster."

Miriam reported this to GCR, and was instructed to make immediate contact with the source. Yee agreed and gave the order.

"This is SD Klikah-Lal NN-five-one-five-U. Please respond."

Within seconds, the return communications beamed to them. "We are in need of immediate transfer to SD Klikah-Lal." She heard heavy gasping. Then the voice continued slowly, "We have 12 dead and five critically wounded. Atmospheric control is malfunctioning due to battle damage. Please send out a lifeboat and we will come aboard unarmed. This is Commander Arden Ardel AB-Six speaking. Please respond. . . ." The voice, which had grown weaker, ended in a gasp, then nothing.

Yee spun around in her chair, and the tension on the bridge seemed to lessen a bit. She barked into her comm-unit, "Send out a lifeboat with recovery group three." Then she ordered briskly, "Communications, respond to the affirmative."

"Your signal has been received and approved," Miriam said clearly, her heart pounding with anticipation. "We have dispatched a recovery vessel to pick you up. Keep your channel open for further communications. . . ."

Chapter 8

Rescue

The red thread, according to legend, is a feminine personality that wends her way through the fabric of time to one day bring together elements of past, present, and future to bring an arcane truth upon which our very survival depends.

The blue thread, on the other hand, is a masculine personality appearing now and again as a parallel stitch to his feminine counterpart . . . a contrasting value without whom our prophesy is incomplete.

11:10-17 JERIN 6136-7N5

Sister Frody Mar maneuvered the lifeboat-fighter alongside the battered wreck of the Tibot. She and her team were prepared to take on the vessel's wounded and dead. From the Tibot's ruined condition, it was a miracle that anyone remained alive on the craft.

The TU1061 Tibot was little more than 600 meters long, with a beam of 50 meters. The sleek grey craft had been gouged open from internal explosions, and was punctured with numerous jagged holes and tears. Additionally, blue streaks from laser burns marred the hull. How anyone could survive such a trauma as the Tibot had passed through, Frody couldn't guess, but, according to CIC, someone was in there all the same.

Slowly, and with extreme caution, Frody maneuvered her fighter and attached it next to the derelict with extended grappling gear. After two armed guards stationed themselves between the inner and outer airlock hatches, in preparation for any traps, the lifeboat's outer airlock silently opened into the void.

Two crew members picked their way slowly along the battered derelict's hull to its twisted airlock, all the while supported by grip-lines attached to their own vessel. The airlock was jammed shut, with a head-sized crater piercing it near the main hinge. Nodding to each other, they moved cautiously along the torn hull, avoiding the twisted and sharp pieces of metal thrust jaggedly outwards. They soon found an exposed passageway leading inside. Something like a power cell had exploded and torn a hole about the size of a man right next to the passage that led to the airlock. Carefully, using hand-held laser cutters, the two women enlarged the hole enough to enter.

Once inside, the two found the vessel completely depressurized. As they made their way towards the dead ship's forward section, one following the other, they found 12 spacesuited corpses tied together in a line. All looked peacefully asleep, for they'd probably died from internal injuries while unconscious.

After inspecting the corpses, the women moved further into the vessel. They could do nothing to help the dead, while five more men needed to be accounted for. They moved slowly along gleaming metal corridors, each shivering inside her spacesuit remembering the silent corpses.

Within a few minutes, they found the five remaining men. All were on the ship's bridge, which, since it was in the ship's forward section, was not as badly damaged and still pressurized. The women entered into a short passage through a hatch. They glanced at each other as a surge of atmospheric gas escaped. Closing the hatch behind them, they proceeded along the passage to the next closed hatch. Beyond this was the ship's main bridge.

Both moved inside quickly. Four of the men were apparently unconscious and the fifth couldn't move because of internal bleeding. All wore spacesuits without their helmets, and the one who was still conscious had his eyes open, although they were glazed from both shock and pain. Oddly, he was still able to watch them.

Sister Era Uhl touched her comm-link activator switch on her wrist and reported the situation on the Tibot. "We need some support here," she said crisply, carefully articulating her words from inside her space helmet. "We have to move these people into surgery immediately or we will lose them. I don't even know what's

keeping them together in the first place." The last was added under her breath.

Sister Frody wrinkled her forehead in thought, then, turned to the rest of the lifeboat crew. Over the comm-link Era heard some dim mumbling, then, Frody came on again. "I'm sending three more to you. Is that enough?"

"Yes. We also need five screen lifters."

Frody sent the three immediately, leaving only herself and the gunner on the rescue vessel. The normal procedure for one of these rescue missions was to send a maximum of four technicians and retain three aboard the rescue craft. Under the circumstances, she felt the risk was necessary. She had an odd intuition they weren't alone out here, and she didn't want to run into whomever, or whatever, had worked the Tibot over.

The three medical technicians arrived promptly. Era knew her business and had already checked for any ambush possibilities, so they moved quickly and without fear. In less than 30 minutes, the five wounded men were brought aboard the Klikah and shuttled directly into the medical facility where they were stripped of their spacesuits and uniforms. The medical team, headed by Quorib B'Nussoh, applied first aid immediately. It took some time to stabilize the wounded men's condition, while the doctor probed for the most critical wounds.

Miriam worked alongside Quorib, who hissed instructions and her diagnosis of each problem. "Most of the wounds were caused by shock waves, probably from nearby explosions," she murmured in her soothing voice, her hands and eyes working quickly. "Blood vessels and tissues in the internal organs are badly damaged. One may not make it."

Miriam nodded, and followed each instruction without hesitation. Part of her, one of her Magum components, already knew the instruction before it came, because of her extensive medical background. During a short pause, she noted Quorib's eyes looked sad, if there was any way that her large, yellow, reptilian eyes could look sad. Her hissing voice dropped when she pronounced her diagnosis for the most injured of the men.

While Quorib's medical team worked over the hours to save the lives of the five injured men, the 12 corpses were brought aboard and their spacesuits removed. Each man was semi-thawed, since they'd been frozen in the vacuum of space while the five living were

protected on the ship's bridge. After thawing, they were straightened and refrozen in the Klikah's morgue. Each man had, it seemed, died from internal rupturing and bleeding caused by shocks from numerous explosions aboard the Tibot. Explosions probably caused by battle damage that couldn't be brought under control.

Frody nodded at the concise report. "Those poor men," she said, her voice hushed. "I wonder who could've attacked their ship so quickly and effectively. Obviously they didn't have time to use their deadman switch."

Era nodded. "And even stranger, why did the enemy not take the Tibot? If they went to all the trouble to destroy her, surely they would want to study her."

Frody shook her head. "It just doesn't make sense. Maybe the Captain will learn something." Frowning, she continued to check each man's body carefully, attaching identification markers and scanning for Gamma-B's.

This completed, she and Era wrapped each body in a plastic liner for storage in the cold morgue.

Era paused and studied the face of one young man. He had dark red hair, stern features, and when she checked his eyes', large gray irises. She frowned to herself, blinking back her tears; it broke her heart to see such horrible things as this happen. All of the men were strangely young in appearance and of different races.

Arden Ardel had nearly lost consciousness when the Nashramh people boarded his vessel and moved him back to their own. The pain wasn't so bad, for his entrails, which he knew were badly damaged and hemorrhaging, only throbbed dully. He slowly descended into the pleasant lassitude of shock. Afterwards, when he was healing, he never knew how he remained conscious; he only knew it was imperative for him to be alert when his ship was boarded.

Once aboard the sisterhood vessel, Ardel drifted in and out of consciousness, and during one hazy awakening, he dimly heard the hissing voice of Sister Quorib.

"This one is now dead," she said. "Please check for a gamma-B."

Coming slightly alert, Ardel tried to move despite the pain churning in his entrails, and soon realized he was strapped to the top of a table. He was naked and only lightly covered with a thin plastinap sheet.

His mind focused a little, and he grew more aware of his surroundings. An intravenous tube was strapped to his left arm, and as the moments passed, he felt the pain in his entrails begin to diminish. He was being given an anesthetic.

As his eyes focused for a moment, he saw the face of a woman directly above him. He struggled to remember something important, but the soothing effect of the anesthetic was making him fall asleep. But there was something important. . . .

He dimly tried to shake his head, to no avail. But, in his last attempt to remain alert, his eyes focused again, and he found himself staring into the unblinking dark red eyes of a young woman.

"Can you speak, Commander Ardel?" she asked.

With an immeasurable effort, he whispered, "Yes."

She nodded. "Good. Then, I must ask your permission on an important matter. Are you aware enough now to make a rational decision?"

"Yes I am," he whispered, his voice barely audible, "What do you. . . ."

"We must destroy your vessel before we leave this area, so it won't fall into enemy hands. May we have your permission to remove your ship's log crystals and security gear before doing so?" She paused slightly. "They'll be held in quarantine until you sign for their release."

Ardel's eyes blurred, and he felt unconsciousness creeping up on him again. This was what he'd been trying to remember. Yet, he was still surprised by her request, and when he tried to answer, he was unable to.

"Please respond to my question if you can," Miriam urged softly. "Do we have your permission to remove the items?"

"Yes, you do. . . ." Ardel whispered as he closed his eyes, no longer able to fight unconsciousness.

Miriam immediately relayed the message to Yee, and presently all the log crystals and security gear were stripped out of the derelict, Tibot, and stored in the Klikah's quarantine locker.

After the Ansharim property was stowed in the quarantine locker, Yee oversaw the sealing of the chamber by the vessel's computer system; the code for the lock was relayed to a special file in the captain's quarters which could be used only by the captain,

or her successor if something happened to her. Once the computer verified the security of the property, the matter was laid to rest.

After Era's team removed all security items from the Tibot, the Klikah moved to a position 500,000 kilometers from the twisted hulk. The team placed a nuclear limpet mine next to the Tibot's sub-binary reactor, and once the Klikah was out of range, Yee detonated it by remote control.

Miriam watched on the viewscreen in the darkened situation room, as the Tibot exploded. She was amazed by the beauty such destruction could have. First there was a blinding white flash from the initial detonation, which reached out to displace the blackness of the void. Seconds later came the afterflux of the sub-binary drive, which imploded, then the final explosion, the most blinding of the three.

As the dazzling white-blue flash from the brilliant explosion diminished, Miriam saw a delicate ring of blue and violet gases expanding and slowly fading into the abyss. Within minutes, nothing remained but web-like vestiges of deep violet, and she felt she could almost hear the lonely and mournful howl of ionic winds coursing through the void. Suddenly feeling small and lonely in the face of the abyss and eternity, Miriam shivered and withdrew a little into herself.

As the computer verified and logged the Tibot's destruction, the Klikah dropped into the sub-binary, and made her heading for a point near the trailing edge of the galaxy's seventh-arm. Yee took no chances of being found in the area.

A short time later, Yee spoke to Miriam alone in her cabin. She was agitated and made no secret about it.

"Miriam, this is important and I know that by reporting this observation we'll appear to have disobeyed our orders from Council Central," she said deliberately while looking directly into Miriam's eyes. "But, the fact is what we discovered was quite by accident. When Sister Frody and her crew were placing their sapping device next to the Tibot's sub-binary drive, she couldn't help but notice its identical appearance to our own advanced Robel drive. She snapped open the console blank-out unit on the drive's computrak linkage and found it to be identical to ours." Pausing for a moment, she continued, "Do you see what I'm getting at? One of our most closely guarded secrets, the advanced Robel drive, is in this brotherhood's hands and in use on their ships. No matter how

bad it looks for us, we have to report this to Council Central! If somebody has to take the rap for disobeying orders, it will be me, and me alone."

Miriam responded quietly, her voice oddly different and cultured. "Fear you not, Sister-Captain Yee Ochs, for we have many secrets we do not discuss within our ranks. You have made a correct decision in both checking the brotherhood's drive and reporting your findings to us. Now rest you your conscience, for you and your kind are held highly in our esteem." With this, Miriam smiled and left without further comment.

As the days progressed, the four wounded men began to respond to the sister's medical treatment. Each was still in bad shape, but at least their conditions were no longer critical. Quorib thought they'd all pull through.

Quorib had absolutely no trouble from her charges. The three technicians remained silent throughout the voyage, except to answer specific questions about their physical condition. Only Commander Ardel spoke, and when he did, it was with guarded brevity.

Arden Ardel lay awake, feeling more alert than he had for what seemed to be ages. The Klikah's doctor, Quorib, told him what he already surmised; he had been, like his remaining three crew members, near death. Only now, after seven days, was he beginning to feel better. A few minutes earlier, Quorib told him he could try eating solid food in small amounts in another three days. She seemed to have performed miracles after the beating he'd taken.

Yawning, Ardel drifted off to sleep; he slept a lot now. His body was completely relaxed, and he had the same heavy, warm feeling in his chest that he did after a long day of hard work, a good meal and a relaxing evening. Closing his eyes, he thought about the situation and mentioned his concerns to his Council Central and Danel. Deep in his mind's eye, Arden saw Danel smiling and heard his warm voice saying, "You've some pleasant surprises ahead of you, Arden. Now observe these Nashramh Sisters, but give them little for the moment."

The Nashramh women on this vessel seemed to have changed a great deal from those of the past. They appeared to be far more mature than before; none asked him any questions about the Tibot's operation, or how she'd been put out of action and wrecked.

But those damned eyes on one bothered him. Every time the girl, an elf of about 25 years, looked at him, something turned in his inner mind. The deep, sad look in those eyes gnawed at him.

Ardel knew the girl was a Magum; so was he. Yet, there was something else in her ancient eyes, something different. If only he could remember!

He smiled to himself. Then there was that little reptilian doctor, with her wide, unblinking yellow eyes, nearly hairless head, and pointed ears. Her he liked. Those soft, gentle little hands made the brotherhood's surgeons seem like butchers, although her techniques were roughly the same. It was obvious that Quorib loved her work, and this love itself seemed to flow out of her slim, deft hands and into the wounds of her patients.

Quorib also had a great bedside manner. She would stare at him with her large, yellow eyes and hiss funny little stories as she checked and gently probed him to observe his recovery. It was impossible to feel bad in her presence and painful or not, he smiled when she came by, and even laughed at her funny quips.

Each day, Miriam took time out from her duties to check with the Klikah's wounded passengers. She'd been officially placed in charge of the operation by Council Central, much to the relief of Captain Ochs, who had the Klikah to worry about and wanted nothing more. When Miriam told her of the decision, a big grin spread over the woman's tired face. "You aren't hurting my feelings, Miriam. I prefer to take care of my ship without any distractions."

During her daily visits to the wounded men, Miriam told them the Klikah's position and progress, although she didn't disclose their destination. She knew Ardel, whom she could tell was a Magum, would discern their heading for himself if he really was from the Ansharim. And, indeed, he did know exactly where they were heading; the Klikah would soon rendezvous with an Ansharim warship, and turn her wounded over to their own people.

* * *

Jenn waited alone on the customs ramp for the incoming passengers to begin their processing and baggage checks. She was going to meet Neftalak!

Jenn had graduated from communications school, and taken an additional year's course in cryptanalysis, which was reserved

for communications honors graduates who displayed exceptional abilities. Jenn's understanding of the enemy's Borg language, and his two lesser tongues, prompted her selection for the intensive and difficult course. Thanks to Miriam, who taught her the enemy languages, she now had the basic tools to build a lasting career in the Sisterhood.

Now Jenn's status was Sister-Novice, despite Nitel Glass' negative predictions years before. She was assigned by Council Central, as an undercover agent for Nashramh Intelligence, to the Galactic Trade Monopoly's Fleet Liaison Exchange Headquarters, at Sandwick Naval Station, on Unam XIV. This was where Neftalak was stationed, and where they would be married.

At last the 14 passengers cleared the customs counter, and Jenn walked over to the inspector and presented her identification disc. The stocky security man looked at her appraisingly for a brief moment, then said, "Please look into the retina scanner with your right eye first, then the left."

Jenn complied, and after several seconds, the inspector returned her disc and directed her to the next counter. There, an older man took her two handbags and her purse and placed them on a wide conveyor belt.

"Just pick them up on the other end of the scanner," he said disinterestedly. "Have a good voyage."

Jenn nodded and thanked him, then walked past the screen to where she could retrieve her bags.

Jenn had never traveled alone before, except when she was a baby, which she couldn't remember. This time, though, she was really excited about the voyage, since she would be working in the starliner's communications center as a grade 10 Comm-tech. The arrangement pleased her, since she wouldn't be so lonely that way; besides, she had the end of her journey to look forward to. When she arrived at Sandwick Naval Station, she'd be getting married. Neftalak was stationed there, and her Nashramh counselor had pulled strings to get Jenn employed there, too.

Jenn smiled to herself, her elfin face lighting up. Just the prospect of being with Neftalak again relieved her apprehensions about the voyage, and about not knowing anyone. When they were married, she promised herself for the hundredth time, they would make love every night, have lots of children, and go to lots of parties. She planned to have fun while being married and she just

knew everything would be perfect when she and Neftalak were together again.

Well, almost perfect. During the years in college, neither Jenn nor Neferah heard anything from Miriam. Jenn and Neftalak kept in constant contact to plan the future, and even talked on intergalactic communications several times. She had felt thrills run up her spine just hearing his deep and sensitive voice.

Yet, there had been nothing from Miriam. No news, nothing. She would give anything to see Miriam again, and missed her dreadfully. For the hundredth time, Jenn wished she hadn't made her friend mad at her.

Miriam was like a wonderful dream to Jenn, a dream in which she saw some great and wondrous thing so beautiful that she sought to find the dream again. Miriam was like a beautiful strain of music that wafted by and was gone, never to be heard again. Or, as Jenn put it, like waking up on the first morning of the holidays with all sorts of good things planned. She just couldn't put into words what she felt for Miriam, even after all the mean things Miriam had done to her, like sending Eaun to teach her stuff and beat her up.

But Jenn did know one thing; she missed Miriam more than anything. Even more than she'd missed Neftalak, if that was possible, although in a different way. She would give anything to see her again. Every time she saw someone who carried herself the way Miriam did, or who had similar features or voice, Jenn would run up behind her hoping that it was, indeed, her friend. It never was, and Jenn was beginning to think she would never see Miriam again.

In many ways, Jenn regretted having stopped her lessons with Miriam so long ago, although she was still torn between Miriam and Neftalak. Even now she didn't know if she would do it again under the same circumstances, for she didn't know how she could live without either of them.

Pushing these sad thoughts out of her mind, for she knew they would make her cry, Jenn boarded the shuttle that would transfer her to the starliner in four days. Boy, she could hardly wait to see those parks and malls Miriam told her about when they were children. Maybe she would even see a real live Mnemex!

* * *

Miriam sat across from the prostrate Arden Ardel and began briefing him on the agenda for transferring him and his men to the Ansharim battle cruiser KB4492 'Galen' in three days time.

Something about Arden struck a deep note in Miriam's mind, and made her feel sad and nostalgic whenever she talked to him. Even though he was somewhat battered from his ordeal on the now dead Tibot, he was quite attractive with black hair, warm brown eyes, and a rugged face with creased dimples. Whenever he smiled, which was usually when Quorib made some funny little joke, his face lit up in an almost boyish way.

Ardel was always polite and cordial, although guarded in what he said. He had the eyes of a Magum, but with an odd aspect to them, that Miriam couldn't understand. She knew that in some way he was special, even for a Magum. Her mind went back to a conversation she had with Ruby millennia ago.

"Ruby, why is it that Magums recognize me, and non-Magums who know of us do as well, whereas they usually cannot recognize each other all of the time?"

Ruby studied Miriam for a few minutes. "Probably because you have the strangest eyes any Magum has ever had," she confessed. "Something in them discloses your status, but there is something more. Magums, with the exception of only a very few, cannot be distinguished from anyone else by the untrained observer. While their eyes, the windows and mirrors to their binary souls, show a trace of their complexity and unusual wisdom, it's not evident to those who know little or nothing about the true binary personality. But you, you are something more, as we've discussed before. This anomaly shines through your eyes like a beacon and as a hint of eternity. The others, while different from non-binaries, are similar enough that they can coexist without giving themselves away."

Miriam didn't completely fathom what Ruby meant, and it still puzzled her. Mainly by her instinct, rather than sight or other senses, she knew when she was dealing with another Magum, even if the woman or man wasn't introduced as such.

Now, looking at Arden Ardel, Miriam came to understand a bit of what Ruby meant. Ardel was something different, a little more than just a Magum, although she couldn't put her finger on it. A certain quality to his eyes reminded her of her own, and in some ways of Ruby's; they always remained the same, no matter what expression his features took.

Miriam frowned to herself. Perhaps it was only that she'd never met a male Magum before, but whatever it was, she was a bit annoyed by it. Another thing bothered her: Ardel always insisted on looking deeply into her eyes, as if searching for something.

"Well, Commander Ardel, your stay with us is about over. In 94 hours we rendezvous with your brotherhood battle cruiser KB4492 Galen and transfer you aboard her."

Ardel already knew all the details from one of his Magum counterparts on the Galen, but he still let her brief him.

He'd finally remembered who she was, from their last meeting many millennia ago. Danel suggested that he not disclose his identity at this time. Whatever the mystery was, it bothered him.

He had liked her more before; she'd been better-looking, partly because of her air of innocence. Now she seemed more self-assured, and even had a certain hardness about her that spelled a loneliness of spirit. Oh, he knew she was a Magum, and had all the sustenance her ten fused personalities could give her. But something in her eyes and attitude suggested she was only a singular person, still searching for a partner with whom to share eternity.

It seemed as though she'd lost everything, perhaps even a part of herself, and become harder to keep from shattering completely.

Whatever it was, it bothered him, especially since he sensed his own effect on her. He had a familiar feeling that he had, in some remote way, been a party to whatever troubled her. There was also a nagging in the back of his mind that Danel and his Council Central knew something of these Nashramh Sisters, and possibly this girl Miriam that they weren't telling him. He'd have to look into the matter once on the Galen.

"I take it you're in charge of this operation, Sister Miriam," he said in his rumbling drawl. He smiled to himself. "Do you have some sort of rank or title, or is it just Sister Miriam?"

"Just Sister Miriam," she replied, briefly looking up from her compu-pad into his disturbing brown eyes. "Is it important to you?"

She seemed just a little more cautious, although to an inexperienced eye, there was no change.

"No," he answered. "But I've noticed that everyone else on this vessel has insignia of rank, except you. That, coupled with your

obvious youth, makes me wonder about your exact position and authority."

Miriam laughed softly. "My, aren't you observant? I guess that's why you're a Commander and I'm not."

With this, she finished consulting her compu-pad and returned to the procedure for transferring the Ansharim personnel and their property from the quarantine locker to the Galen. She left nothing unaccounted for, and Ardel agreed to the entire procedure.

The Klikah drew alongside the Ansharim cruiser, and the larger vessel extended grappling gear and a pressurized transfer tube to her airlock. Communications between the two vessels remained at a minimum, consisting of narrow-beam blinking alignment lights. All arrangements for the operation had already been made between the Nashramh's Council Central and the Ansharim's governing body. The Klikah's captain just followed Council Central's detailed instructions, and thereby avoided long-range communications which the enemy could detect.

During this exchange, Miriam came to realize another special secret. The Nashramh and the Ansharim were obviously in very close contact with one another, judging from the smoothness of this operation. She wasn't certain, but she guessed it had been for a very long time.

Quorib B'Nussoh coordinated the transfer of wounded men with Doctor Ishim Tobenah from the Galen. The Ansharim doctor examined each of the four living men and concluded they could be transferred safely.

"Doctor B'Nussoh," he said with a happy, youthful grin, "I thank you and your staff for what you've done for our men, and for the care you have personally given them." He bowed and kissed her little hand.

Quorib had difficulty keeping her composure, since she'd never met anyone as 'beautiful' as this Doctor Ishim before. Actually, he had a rather homely face with warm brown eyes, carrot-colored hair, and ears that stuck out from his head. But to have him kiss her hand . . . wow!

Miriam, who was still in charge of the Nashramh end of the operation, accompanied the four men and Quorib to the ship's airlock. Once there, she saw that all property, which Captain Ochs had released with her special computerized code, was duly accounted for and properly transferred to the cruiser.

"Now, Commander Ardel," she said with a smile, "you see? We didn't steal your secrets or murder you in your sleep. We really aren't that bad, you know."

Ardel was the last of the four men to be attended to by Doctor Ishim. As the brotherhood medic wheeled him through the ship's airlock, Arden craned his head to face Miriam. Winking, with a slightly wolfish grin, he said, "Miriam! I don't really eat little elves, you know."

And, with this parting shot, he was gone.

Miriam stood puzzled for a few seconds. Then, like a bolt out of the blue, it hit her. Condon? Ben Condon? "Could it be?" she murmured aloud, not realizing it.

Nearly in a state of shock, she walked back to the situation room. The words from out of her past rang in her ears: "Ben Condon is my name, and eating little elves is my game."

The entire operation took only minutes, and presently the Klikah disengaged from the battle cruiser and made her heading back to the sector from which she had come. After setting and verifying the ship's navigational heading Yee dropped back into the sub-binary. Not a word was spoken between the two vessels during the entire operation, and now it was back to business as usual.

Yee Ochs thought long and hard about the entire affair and came to the same conclusions as Miriam. There was a lot more going on out here than she could guess, and she realized the Klikah-Lal's mission was much more important than she'd ever suspected. She and her crew would do their share, no matter the price. Those bastards from Belial's legions were in for a surprise.

The subject of the strange operation was never discussed, and everyone settled in for the voyage back to their area of operations.

* * *

Ionic winds blowing between the stars, and other poetic forms, express things felt rather than seen. Long dead human emotions, separated by trillions of events in the steady process of temporal time, come alive again like a repeated verse from a lingering song. Things long forgotten, awaken to the glowing light of ethereal memory, and burst into life as a newborn flame. Miriam, the ancient personality sleeping in the Magum's mind, awoke in a dream that was reality.

Chapter 9

Miriam

Our mind, spirit, and soul, technically our gamma-complex, is a wonderful universe unto itself . . . a window to all realities we've ever encountered in our trek through time and space. Herein, nothing is ever forgotten, although sometimes hidden away until called upon to surface . . . as it was with Miriam . . .

24:00-26 MAGUM 6136-7N5

Somewhere deep in the night of her inner mind, a dim light shone almost as a primitive wax candle glowing dimly in a dark room. There were phantoms here; things hidden in the shadows that could never see the brightness of day. The tiny flickering light began to grow in size and intensity, despite the smothering blanket of overbearing darkness, until it became a blazing inferno that could no longer be hidden or ignored.

13:30-06 JERIN 0560-4N4

The girl, pale and shivering, sat alone on a stone bench, her long black hair hanging in wet strands down to her narrow shoulders. Misty rain blew past the surrounding pines, and water dropped drearily from scattered bushes and the overhanging roof of her temporary shelter. Moody grey clouds filled the sky and rolled turbulently as strong upper winds blew them high above. An occasional gust of chilled biting air swept along and under the overhang. Everything was cold, wet, and grey.

Another gust of wind blew under the shelter, and the girl shivered violently. After a few long, tense moments, her shivering diminished. She sat alone, staring dully out of the low shelter onto a long, winding path of mud and puddles leading from a distant grove of pine trees. In the distance, a figure worked its way along the path toward the shelter, alternately avoiding the deep puddles and blundering into them. The figure's poncho swirled and whipped in sudden bursts of wind.

Her eyes wide with trepidation, the skinny girl held her cocked pistol close under her poncho and waited, trying to breathe normally; the pistol shook slightly from her cold and nervous shivers. She hadn't seen another person for a long time, and had never killed anyone before. Could she do it, she wondered. In a few minutes she might have to.

She stiffened abruptly, her back aching. All around, cold water dripped incessantly. If this damn rain didn't stop plopping soon, she might start screaming.

The man approached the shelter, his hands clearly visible. He wore a long poncho-overcoat much too big for him, and a slouched hat from which relentless rain drops pattered and dripped. As he came closer, the girl placed both hands on her pistol and tried to stop her shivering.

"You're Miriam, I presume," he smiled wryly, speaking in a pleasant, rumbling voice. "And I'm Arden Ardel. Do you plan to shoot me with that pistol, or shall we talk?"

Miriam was unaware that she'd pulled the weapon from under her poncho. It was leveled directly at him, unnerving her and causing her mind to whirl. Should she shoot?

"Come on now, Miriam, either shoot now or talk," he laughed amiably, his brown eyes twinkling. "I'm not really a bad fellow, other than being a rapist and a hatchet killer." Small dimples creased his face when he grinned, and he submissively spread his hands.

Miriam frowned, determined to keep her guard up. After all, she didn't know him or what he really wanted, and he obviously didn't have enough respect to be serious. She decided to keep her pistol ready, just in case. "Okay, let's talk, then," she muttered sullenly.

Memories sped up and slowed, both at the same time and seemingly not at all. The two talked and made an uneasy truce. They decided to work together on this assignment. Arden Ardel was

an agent of the Ansharim Brotherhood. Miriam made it perfectly clear, she was her own boss. She might accept his suggestions, but not his orders, and so it went. Ardel decided, then and there, to be careful. This girl was obviously hostile and insecure.

That was their first assignment together, so long, long ago . . . when was it? It was the sixth day of JERIN, 0560-4N4, the month the accursed Borgdragon wall was begun.

The mission was completed without mishap, and the two returned to their own organizations; his was the ancient and mysterious Ansharim Brotherhood and hers the still fledgling Nashramh Sisterhood. Together, they'd become the basis for the most important experiment to be attempted between the two organizations: could the rank and file of the two to work together to oppose Samael's invasion of their Starset Galaxy? This phase of the experiment was considered a success by both the Ansharim and the Nashramh, but would this brief success continue?

The fire dimmed to a dim and flickering flame again, for a long while, and the inner shadows lengthened ominously. Then, without warning, it burst forth with greater intensity.

18:03-09 BENEM 1860-4N4

She lay face down in stifling mud, the child clasped tightly under her soaked tunic. Her head spun wildly as rough hands pulled her to her feet, and she gasped in pain and confusion. Staggering, she couldn't see beyond the dull red haze clouding her vision. She felt blind and alone in the midst of a maelstrom. Instinctively, she pressed the vulnerable child closer and dimly heard it cough.

Rough, bruising hands grabbed her shoulders and forced her to stumble through the slimy mud. She never knew how she managed to clutch the slipping infant to her breast as she stumbled, slid and was dragged along. Her mouth was filled with the red coppery taste of her own blood and the grit of dark mud, but she didn't really notice because of the horrible confusion. The pounding sounds of rifle fire filled her head and wracked her body with nausea and pain.

After a seeming infinity, through thick waves of red pain and moments of unconsciousness, she heard a loud clank as a metal hatch slammed open.

"Get her in," a low voice growled behind her. "And watch out for the baby under her tunic."

Her head started to spin again. Then it cleared, and she saw a lighted glow in front of her and to her right. She became dimly aware of something warm trickling down her forehead, and with a vague sense of nausea realized it was blood. Her side was on fire with pain, and the nausea threatened again.

Her vision focusing, she turned, hearing the rush of noise around her, and saw other mud-soaked people being pushed into the loading hatch of the rescue lighter to her right. Lead projectiles struck against its metal skin no more than a meter away from her in a rapid staccato, and she heard loud dull thunks as each of them hit the lighter. She would always remember the hollow, metallic thunks, as 14 of them . . . yes, exactly 14, struck solid metal and the bellowing voice afterwards.

From outside, Ardel yelled, "Get the hell out of here! I'll give you cover fire!"

Then, grasped roughly by her shoulders, Miriam was thrust away from the hatch, which closed, blotting out a thick, pelting burst of rain. The rain, upon hitting her face, had cleared her senses, allowing her to get a brief glimpse of the tall, muscular Ardel who fired round after round of return fire at the enemy onslaught.

Miriam stumbled and fell to her knees, her mouth gritty and parched, and gentle hands took the baby from her just before she fainted. With a dim roar, the rescue craft began to move across the open water toward the submerged mothership, quickly picking up speed.

Later, Miriam learned Ardel had pulled her out of the mud after she was shot by an Ogonard rifleman. Ardel managed to elude the enemy and escape capture, but he died on the enemy controlled world 300 years later, high atop the far-off northern mountains. Without his covering fire, the rest of them, 15 in all, would not have made it off the hostile world.

That was their second mission together, 1,300 years after the first. It too was considered a limited success, although Ardel was left behind. But Miriam, an agent of the Nashramh, and Ardel, an Ansharim agent, had worked together and completed their second mission. That too, was considered a success. Other experiments pairing other sisters and brothers hadn't worked out as well, and

there was an overall feeling of discomfort between the two organizations. They were the pioneers called upon to build a future concordat between the Nashramh and Ansharim, and it would be a long, hard struggle. But time was flowing away, and the enemy was on his way to invade the Starset Galaxy.

Again the flame dwindled to a tiny flicker, and again the dark shadows lengthened. But, after a short time, it surged back to blazing life.

06:15-14 TALUM 3520-4N4

The young man and woman were locked together in an embrace, hungrily kissing, exploring, and moving slowly together in sexual unison.

They had been trapped here on Astorbel Ent for two years, and worked on separate shifts observing the movements of Belial's black emissaries and recording their alien methods of operation.

The enemy had effectively sealed off the entire world from outside contact. Now they were monopolizing all positions of power and stature in both the religious cults and government hierarchies. It wouldn't be long before they had complete control. The signs of the times were evident in the violence between warring factions of the black ones' locally trained forces and resisters who understood the reality of the subversion of their world. The resisters were losing, and all the while Adam Belial was closing the noose around them. His multitudes of faithful followers, who increased in numbers at an astonishing rate, were proclaiming Gensargon, the Belial's name, as their savior and Divine Majesty. The population was fanatically immersing itself in the superstitious dogmas of Gensargon's religious fundamentalism. Free thought was mercilessly suppressed by both the priests and secular authorities.

Ardel stood in front of the bathroom mirror, trimming his beard. He had straight brown hair and warm brown eyes which crinkled up when he smiled. His boyish face was usually cheerful, although during these hard times, there was little to be cheerful about.

Behind him, Miriam impatiently tugged a long comb through her tangled blonde hair. She was already dressed in her grey-blue worker's overalls and checking over her appearance in the bedroom mirror before starting the first observational watch of the day.

"See you at 18:30!" Ardel called out, smiling at her as she left. He didn't think about it at the time, but for some reason she wouldn't meet his eyes in the mirror. He would not see her again.

When Miriam hadn't returned by 20:00 hours, Ardel began to worry, and when she hadn't returned by the next morning, he prepared himself for the worst.

At first Arden thought Miriam had been captured by the police. After checking, however, he found she was still operating in her assigned capacity. She'd left him without a word of explanation. Ardel had no idea why, for he had always respected her and considered her needs ahead of his own. He was deeply hurt and felt betrayed, so he threw himself into his work to survive his threatening despair.

Both continued to operate, although independently, observing and recording the enemy's operations. She avoided him and neither communicated with the other.

On the fifth day of Jerin each year of their mission, Ardel and Miriam went to a hidden transmitter to flash out their combined reports to their allies. This year he had only his own report. During this trip, after Miriam deserted him, he found the transmitter missing.

Worried, Ardel immediately returned to his married worker's apartment, where he was met by an acquaintance who handed him a note. After the man left, Ardel hurriedly unfolded the note, a dirty piece of paper with the number four scratched on it. Immediately he packed a duffel bag, for this was the code for his and Miriam's return to a joint-operations rescue vessel, hovering in orbit over the planet. He was relieved to be leaving, for the violence on this cruel world wearied him.

With his cloth duffel bag slung over his shoulder, Ardel frantically tried to locate Miriam to alert her to the rescue notice. He thought about her a great deal, and although she had coldly deserted him, he still loved her very much. It would take a long time to get over her overt betrayal, but he owed it to her to find and retrieve her, now that rescue was close at hand.

He moved through the dank, crowded streets of the transport worker's section of Astorbel Ent's major port city, Tolifidak. When they first met for this mission, Miriam was cold and aloof. He'd come to realize that despite her insecurity and deep-seated need for personal independence, she was a warm and giving person

under the right circumstances. After two years of working side-by-side, they had moved into the same apartment and become both friends and lovers.

Ardel smiled to himself; for all of her problems, Miriam made him feel really alive. He had never met anyone quite like her, and unobtrusively tried to teach her little things that would help her grow without suggesting she needed to make some attitude adjustments. She was unwilling to take any orders from him, and only considered his professional advice on tactical problems when there was no alternative. But for all this resistance, she had a freshness and innocence that titillated him. Still, he mused, it would be a long time before she could be a true friend and ally.

When Ardel had made certain that Miriam was in neither her newly adopted apartment nor her usual observation stations, he wandered through several worker cafes to see if he could find her. She was a solitary person like himself, so he couldn't ask anyone if they'd seen her.

Arden still wondered why Miriam left him. At first he'd been hurt, and then angry, but this was brief and passed into sadness. He knew he'd done nothing wrong, not a single thing to offend her. Her personal limitations caused her to leave. Her childish insecurities kept her from fulfilling her most desperate needs, and she feared dependence on a man. That controlled her actions. So she ran away.

Ardel walked the crowded streets for five hours without finding any sign of her.

Miriam left her own apartment that morning to begin her regular routine when she encountered the scruffy-looking courier, who'd taken her to their pre-determined pickup point. They waited for Ardel for three hours, and with time running out, they lifted off in the small three-person rescue bell. In 15 minutes, they rendezvoused with the orbiting scout freighter. As soon as the bell was brought aboard, the vessel left the planet's atmosphere. To stay any longer would be too dangerous. Ardel was left behind, still looking for Miriam.

That was early during the month of JERIN 3523-4N4, and nothing was heard from Arden Ardel again. The Nashramh analysts suspected he'd been taken prisoner, since Gensargon gained absolute control over Astorbel Ent during the same year. No

probe teams were able to get near the planet, and its population had killed all off-worlders before the final takeover.

The flame receded again, back to a flickering glow, where darkness and haunting ghosts of things hidden, prevailed for an unmeasured span of time. The dim glow seemed to almost cease, but then it sparked, although less brightly than before.

09:15-29 NASHIM 5470-5N4

Two of the men were already sitting in the conference room when Miriam and her 15 sister-delegates arrived. It was now 09:15 hours, and the conference was scheduled for 10:00 hours. The other men had gone to the cafeteria and would not return until the meeting started.

The two men spoke together quietly as Miriam and her group entered. Smiling grimly, the short woman with tousled brown hair and hard-grey eyes introduced herself and her companions with perfect self-assurance. One of the men, obviously a ranking officer, responded.

"I'm Captain Ardel, and this is my adjutant, Captain Kreger Naft." The other bowed slightly. "Our men will return in 30 minutes, so shall we exchange personnel documents now and take care of the reviews before the conference?"

Miriam agreed, and they exchanged the personnel history and qualification documents. When he looked at her, she felt her face flush, not knowing why. In his grey uniform with small tiny insignia, he looked imposing.

Miriam nodded to her companions as they seated themselves around one end of the conference table. Miriam sat across from Captain Ardel, and began reading the Ansharim documents.

The conference concerned a long-term project in which hundreds of thousands of Nashramh Sisters and Ansharim Brothers would work closely to develop an organizational substructure upon which they could unite and face the pending invasion of the black legions. As of now, Belial's legions had only converted several thousand star systems to their service and were using them for industrial and military strongholds to support the main thrust of their invasion. There were ever increasing signs that this main penetration was coming soon, and the situation was becoming desperate.

The Nashramh Sisterhood, in the central rim of the sixth-arm of the galaxy, was now in danger of being overwhelmed, for the enemy had chosen this zone for his invasion. The Nashramh desperately needed the brotherhood's aid in their upcoming sapping project. Unfortunately, previous attempts to match their most competent members together on important joint missions had not gone well, and this conference was meant to determine whether the two groups could operate effectively together.

If a formula could be agreed to, they would determine which personnel would unite the two organizations' fighting forces for the defense of the sixth arm. If all went well, Miriam and her 15 sisters, who were major team leaders, with Ardel and his 15 brothers, also team leaders, would soon begin joint operations.

Miriam scanned the documents Ardel had given her. Everything looked good, but she wasn't taking chances; this operation was too critical to let anything go wrong. Fortunately, all of the men described in the documents appeared to be well-qualified. It looked as if things would go well.

Ardel looked up from the Nashramh documents, his face grim. "Our agreement stated that all questions on the attached form would be answered in full on each of your historical documents," he stated flatly. "Has this requirement been fully complied with on all of your documents?"

Miriam looked the man straight in the eyes and responded, "Yes, it has." Oddly, his name seemed to stir in her memory.

"According to these documents, none of your people have ever dealt with the Ansharim before," Ardel said softly. "Is this true?"

Miriam raised an eyebrow, wondering what he was talking about; if her superiors said no one had ever worked with the Ansharim before, then that was the cover story.

"We have complied with the agreement," she snapped, her eyes flashing. "Just what are you getting at?"

This was a critical meeting. The Nashramh desperately needed the Ansharim's active support and participation against Belial's legions. And this damned fool wanted to play games with historical documents.

"You have a very short memory, Miriam," Ardel spoke clearly. Everyone in the room stopped to watch the confrontation, and the sudden silence seemed deafening.

He continued. "You give me a pack of lies which you portray as accurate personnel histories. You claim that none of you have ever dealt with the Ansharim before, right?"

Suddenly Miriam remembered just why his name seemed familiar; she had worked with him before. It was so long, long ago. She remembered that the mission was a partial success. But this was all she could remember . . . the name and his eyes, nothing else.

But Hell! If her superiors entered different information on the documents, there was a good reason. No, she wouldn't give in to this fool.

"What are you getting at?" she answered, struggling to keep her voice level.

"You, my dear, loyal partner, served with me on three separate occasions. Or is your memory so short that you can't remember deserting me on Astorbel Ent?"

Miriam shook her head determinedly, then her eyes widened slightly in both surprise and confusion. Looking helplessly at him, she suddenly remembered the details of her last mission with him, and Ardel saw a change come over her face - first disbelief, then resignation.

Miriam's mind screamed out as she remembered deserting him. Had she really done that? It was so long ago, but suddenly, the memory was as crisp and clear as it had been when she'd looked out through the view-screen on the scout freighter as it pulled away from Astorbel Ent.

Her self-discipline snapped into place, and the brief look of shame cleared from her face before Ardel could even be sure it was ever there. But he knew . . . she remembered . . . she had whispered, "You?"

Then Miriam shook her head stubbornly and said in a strained voice, "I don't know what you are talking about." But her eyes revealed the truth.

Ardel ignored her statement. She lied even when the truth sounded better. If Miriam, the leader of the Nashramh contingent, couldn't admit the falsity of these simple personnel documents when faced with exposure, then there were no grounds for trust or risk by the Ansharim.

"That's right, me!" he pressed. "If either you or your people were honest enough to deal with us from the top of the deck, we might

risk helping you save your skins out here. But since you can't even admit that you have even worked with us, much less having deserted me, and leaving countless others like me to rot in Sargon's hell, forget it."

By now the other 14 men from the Ansharim team had trailed into the conference room. With a last baleful look at Miriam, Ardel said in a low tone, "So be it."

With this, Ardel and Naft picked up their contingent's documents and left the room followed by their men. There would be no conference and no arrangement to work together against the enemy. The women of the Nashramh were not ready, and Ardel had no intention of letting such immature children destroy the Ansharim Brotherhood, which had roots stretching back to the dawn of time.

His instructions from Danel and Council Central were crystal clear - the slightest indication of insincerity or treachery from the Nashramh sisters must be considered as absolute grounds for canceling any and all agreements. And so it was to be. It was no accident that the Ansharim insisted upon low-level meetings before any kind of pact could be signed. The sisterhood hierarchy was too sophisticated and subtle to make such blunders, and they wouldn't be the ones working in the field. The meetings had to involve those who would actually be working and fighting together, and this meeting proved his Council Central's point.

The 16 women stood still in shocked silence. Then, one by one, they began to leave the room.

Ardel and his men took the next transport to the spaceport, and once there, boarded their waiting ship. Everyone was silent, for none had wanted things to go this way.

Ardel shook his head to himself. If only she would have, or could have, admitted the falsity of the documents, they might have begun to work things out from there. Both he and his men were willing to bury the past, however scandalous. Yet, how could they, when these women had learned nothing from their earlier experiences. If they couldn't even be trusted to present simple personnel history documents without treachery, then what could they be trusted to do?

He felt sorry for the girl who, with one ridiculous lie, damned her sisterhood to a single-handed defense against the black legions from Samael's hidden empire.

Miriam stood alone in a state of shock. Now, something deep in her inner mind, hidden yet immensely important, snapped, and she simply stared ahead of her, receding into complete emotional shock. She was standing there when Sister Chensin entered the room.

Chensin walked over to Miriam with precise, fluid movements so as to not startle her. Then, placing her arm around the slumped and defeated shoulders, she quietly led her out through the lobby and into a waiting ground vehicle, which took them to Miriam's quarters.

Miriam wasn't the same after that fateful confrontation, although it took her several days of self-reflection to realize just what she'd done. Through her unwillingness to admit the problem in her documentation, she had single-handedly jeopardized the future of her Sisterhood and turned away the only meaningful ally they had. When the reality of this struck her, she was so demoralized and ashamed of herself that she wanted to hide away and never face her sisters again.

The days following the aborted conference were miserable for Miriam, who had to report the proceedings to a higher authority. She didn't attempt to sidestep her role in the failure, and found it odd that there were no repercussions from her superiors. Her report was accepted without comment and the matter dropped. This didn't ease the matter of her conscience or of her grief. She became listless and felt too tired to properly function in her tactical planning section. She had the feeling everyone was watching her when she walked into her office each morning, all knowing she'd torpedoed the sisterhood during this time of crisis. It took all her self-discipline and personal composure to look anyone in the eye without breaking down and trying to explain her self to them.

Finally, after several weeks of diminishing efficiency, she asked for and received leave for an indefinite period at a rest facility.

Miriam was transferred to Hillsdale Lodge, a charming complex of comfortable bungalows in groves around a central recreation building. All were nestled in a lovely, enchanting tree-laden glen overlooking a clear green lake.

This lovely setting didn't help her at all. Miriam was too deeply mired in her personal despair to notice the beauty surrounding her. All she could feel was an overriding sense of guilt for betraying her sisterhood. Instead of wandering in the healing beauty of the

lodge grounds and mingling with the friendly natives of the area, she remained hidden in her bungalow from the time she arose in the morning until she went to bed at night. She spent her time either lying in the fluffy bed or sitting in an overstuffed chair and staring abstractly into the dancing flames in the fireplace.

Miriam was in the depths of despair. She felt nothing tangible around her except the unrest of her own mind. Nothing mattered anymore and she just went through the motions of living. The most important part of her very being had died - her self-respect.

Several days after arriving at Hillsdale Lodge, Miriam received a high-ranking sister in her room. This was Sister-Magum Ruby, a stately woman with iron-grey hair pulled fashionably atop her head, and the conservative black uniform of a senior officer. Her manner was gentle, but firm, and after introducing herself, she addressed the subject of her visit directly and without ceremony.

"I can see Sister Miriam, that you've completely lost face and hold yourself personally responsible for the aborted conference with the Ansharim," she began tactlessly. Upon entering the stuffy and darkened room, she noticed that not only were the curtains pulled closed, but that Miriam was in bed-clothes she'd obviously worn for several days. Her mousy hair was limp and her face pallid. The woman was wallowing in self-pity and humiliation over her failures.

Ruby sighed and looked Miriam directly in the eye, saying firmly, "Your sins have finally caught up with you and have overwhelmed you. True?"

Miriam looked at her dully, acute misery reflected in her dark eyes, and she answered slowly, with great effort. "Yes, my grace . . . that's true. I hadn't realized what I'd done until I was humiliated in front of my sisters and the results. . . ." Now tears began to stream down her thin, pale face.

"And what was it, you realized?" Ruby asked.

Miriam took in a deep breath, and her eyes, which were now distant, refocused back on Ruby who stood looking at her. She shook herself a little, and took another breath before continuing. Then she murmured almost absently, "I realized what I'd done so long ago . . . I'd fallen in love with Arden Ardel. I'd become terrified that I would lose my freedom and independence to him and become weak and that I'd lose myself in him." She continued while shaking her head slowly, "So, I deserted him and worked alone. I

thought I was reasserting my independence of action. But I was only running away from my childish emotions and insecurities."

Wiping away her tears, Miriam continued. "I'm ashamed of what I've done and why I did it. I know that everyone has made mistakes of their own in the past and that they've learned from them through new incarnate experiences." The words tumbled out lifelessly as if memorized. "And perhaps I've learned from them, and they could have stayed in the past. But they didn't, and it was because of my damned inflexibility that I, alone, destroyed any chance our sisterhood has had for gaining help from the Ansharim. I, alone, have jeopardized the future safety of our sisterhood."

Ruby considered for a moment, herself remembering fragments of personal tragedy and degradation. She easily understood what her younger sister was experiencing.

"Do you want to redeem yourself, Miriam?"

Miriam, now apparently fascinated with her hands, slowly looked up again with unfocused eyes, as if she were looking into another world. Then, as her elfin face cleared for a moment, she cried, "I've let my sisterhood down, disgraced myself, and deserted the only man I ever loved and who loved me! What can I possibly do to redeem myself?" Her shrill voice became plaintive.

Ruby looked down at the slumped and defeated woman. "Don't take all of the blame on yourself in this matter with the Ansharim. I, too, have let our sisterhood down. It was I who wasn't honest when preparing your personnel history documents for the brotherhood because I didn't know they'd recovered Arden Ardel. I thought that since he'd been lost to the black ones, no one would have to know you'd worked together and the mission ended in failure." She paused and took hold of Miriam's shoulders.

"I agree that you made a serious mistake, but there are many of us who are responsible for our failure with the Ansharim. I am part of the reason you had to lie to Ardel and it was I who chose you to represent us at the meeting. We of the sisterhood have made many grave mistakes, because we have a long way to go before we grow to the same maturity the brotherhood has achieved. Now we must talk about how to redeem ourselves."

Somehow Ruby's words penetrated Miriam's wallowing despair, and with the last vestiges of her self-discipline, she focused her attention to what was being said.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know anything about Samael-Borgdragon?"

Miriam nodded. Samael-Borgdragon was the largest and most central of three fortresses being built by Adam Belial on uncharted worlds on the outer reaches of the rim.

Ruby continued. "Then you know that each fortress being built will be impregnable; yet, if we were able to destroy it and the others, the enemy would simply build new ones elsewhere. And, as it is, we only learned of these three by sheer accident. So, we must find a way to infiltrate them without alerting the enemy; in this way, we will be able to observe his forces while allowing the enemy to feel his secrets are safe."

Miriam looked at her, showing interest for the first time. Perhaps she could redeem herself in some way while helping her sisterhood survive the enemy onslaught.

Ruby continued without pausing, her eyes taking on a strange hardness. "You, and millions of our sisters, will infiltrate each of these facilities as slaves to form the nucleus of our intelligence system there. Not one of you will survive this ordeal, but without this supreme sacrifice on your parts, we may well lose control of this arm, and eventually of our Starset Galaxy to the darkness of Adam Belial's terrible reign." Ruby paused and then continued.

"But know you this, Miriam. You will be the first to enter that vile place and you will be the cornerstone of our entire system there. One day you, all of you, will emerge again into the mainstream of our history, never to leave again."

Miriam, now fully interested for the first time in weeks, did not hesitate; she disregarded the last statement which didn't motivate her, for her only desire was to serve her sisterhood and to redeem herself. "When do I leave on this assignment?"

"Now," said Ruby, rising and stepping to the door. "The time for waiting is over. With this, you will redeem yourself and the rest of us, for we are all in this fight together." She paused. "The price of failure is too high to bear."

Ruby did not elaborate further, but originally she hoped to enlist the Ansharim in this far-reaching endeavor. Now they had to go it alone no matter what the price.

Miriam arose from her bed and pulled on a jumpsuit, hastily preparing to leave. She knew she was in the process of a nervous breakdown when the Sister-Magum entered, and feared expulsion or some other punishment for her failures. While in her diminished

emotional state, she'd lost all perspective and sense of proportion with respect to Nashramh policies. No one had ever been expelled from the order, not even for criminal behavior.

Now she had a chance to redeem herself and regain some part of her self-respect. For this she would eagerly face death and oblivion at Borgdragon, or in any other assignment to do so.

Before Miriam left on her new assignment, she was trained and briefed on all known details of her mission. She would be the first to infiltrate the profanity that was to become the vile fortress of Samael-Borgdragon. She would arrive some 279 years before the completion of the foundation level of the barrier wall. Following her millions of her sisters would toil and die in its construction. This black foundation had already consumed the lives of billions of unwilling slaves drafted from more than 5,000 worlds, and these slaves had become part of the very fabric of this living hell.

Miriam learned that Adam Belial's far-flung legions had been ordered to plant their Lord Gensargon's twisted cross on this far-off rimworld to serve as the cornerstone of his conquest of the Starset Galaxy. Two smaller fortresses were also being built on other worlds far from one another on the galaxy's rim. The Nashramh didn't know when and how the final invasion would occur, but they did recognize one critical fact. The black ones had no concept of time; in essence, they had great patience and unlimited resources. Whether the galaxy was subverted in 1,000 years or 100,000 years didn't seem to matter to them. They neither paused nor ceased in their tireless efforts.

Miriam was awed by the unbelievable size of the largest of the three black fortresses, Samael-Borgdragon. The monstrous black barrier wall of the citadel would measure 22 kilometers in height, including the sub foundations which reached 4.5 kilometers below sea level. The top plate of the first foundation level itself, where Miriam was to plant her tiny cornerstone, would reach two kilometers above sea level. Other foundation sections would be built atop it during the next 20,000 years. Each of the four sides would measure 75 kilometers.

The materials for this wall, as well as for the rest of the citadel, were composed of heavy metals brought from Samael's own galaxy, where it apparently was abundant. Local ground materials and a matrix of the once-living bodies of its builders were mixed with the metals. Each layer of ten centimeters was cemented together by

the bodies of these slave laborers, who were crushed alive beneath 10,000-ton rollers as they smoothed the basic building materials. Not only were the bodies of the hapless slaves ground into the building materials, but their souls were trapped as well. There was something alien and indefinable within the special composition of the heavy metals from Samael's far-off galaxy that captured the incorporeal souls of those hapless victims crushed into it. They were imprisoned within the wall's substance without any possible way to escape.

These countless bodies and souls, merged with the alien heavy metals, would become the real strength of the vile fortress. The black wall would indeed become a living, almost organic thing; yet, its vile construction would also be the key to its future destruction.

None of this information daunted Miriam, and after she was thoroughly briefed, she was sedated and taken to the hospital for a simple surgical procedure. Unknown to her, a microscopic red stone was implanted into her skull. After the operation, which was so simple that she was unaware it had even taken place, Miriam was secretly transported to a planet near the outer rim. Once there, she was to merge with the population and be taken as a slave by the black ones operating in the area.

* * *

Miriam was captured by freebooters within a week of her arrival on Tronoki IV and forced aboard a cargo freighter destined for Samael-Borgdragon with a full contingent of 12,000 slave laborers. She was locked in a crowded cargo bay with 2,000 moaning and frightened prisoners, most of who were in family groups. Mingling with the terrified people, she mused that this was going to be a living hell until she was crushed into the vile wall. Once merged with the heavy metal of the wall, she would cease to be part of history or any of this suffering and pain again; there would only be oblivion.

She didn't know the microcrystal implanted in her skull was a device to prevent her soul from merging with the black wall; it would capture her soul after she'd been crushed under the mammoth rollers, and become part of the circuit that was to form the Nashramh's hidden intelligence network at Borgdragon.

Old, withered, and broken, Miriam approached the northwest corner of the huge black wall which, although it was barely started, was already monstrous. It dominated everything from the moment the slaves were beaten awake and forced to toil until they dropped to sleep.

The top plate was slowly being poured and formed by the black ones' immense machinery, and behind her she could hear the cries and screams of slaves already being crushed by the 10,000-ton roller on the edge of the east side. Her mind dimmed out the terrible sound of the dying slaves, and with infinite care, she made her way to the spot that was predetermined for her to die.

Miriam had already been worked long and hard by her cruel and alien captors; no slaves were ever disposed of until the maximum amount of labor was wrenched out of them. The black ones were experts at making unwilling slaves work, either by applying personal disciplinary measures with chemicals and electric whips, or by threats against friends and families who were captured together. The slaves were given a simple diet of bread and water, and Miriam knew the bread had an added stimulant that made the slaves work longer and harder during their long shifts. When the stimulating effects of the drug wore off, after about 12 hours, the slaves made their way to whatever soft spot they could find, and literally dropped off to sleep. Then, after three or four hours, the guards awoke them with various brutal tactics, and the whole process would begin again.

Although the living conditions were primitive, the slaves lived for a long time, sometimes more than 200 years. The grey bread, while filled with the stimulant, was also charged with nutrients, so the slaves didn't waste away and die. Sanitation was nonexistent and everyone lived in filth.

Miriam reached her designated spot and fell to the ground in a simulated faint while other sweaty and filthy people trudged past her, all of them too tired and defeated to even attempt to help her. Behind her, she could hear the guards herding people into the path of an oncoming roller to be crushed into the soft pavement. None would escape, for there was nowhere to go; there was only the surface of the pavement and a huge vertical drop-off on each side of the wall.

Silently and without drawing attention, other women began to fall down in a straight, line beginning at the point where Miriam

lay waiting for her final moment. All around, panicked and desperate people tried to elude the terrible roller - without avail.

As she lay doubled up on the warm pavement, Miriam absently watched as dull grey clouds moved above, and was relieved that it was about to end. It was hell here, not only from what happened to her, but the terrible fates of innocent people around her. Men, women, and children were beaten daily and reduced to filthy, cowering animals before they were finally put to death. No degradation escaped them from the moment they were captured to their final gasp for breath. It was truly a place in hell.

Silently, Miriam spoke out the words of confirmation, "Hear O Daughters of Compassionate Wisdom, the Eternal our Creator, the Eternal is one!" Her memory briefly flashed back to Ardel, and as she opened her eyes, the blood-red sun shone through a thinning in the clouds above. Suddenly the sun was gone and the monstrous black roller blocked out everything. Around her she could hear the sickening crunching and slithering sounds of human bodies being crushed, and her senses were overwhelmed by the sound of an incredible vibrating hum as the roller moved steadily over her.

Miriam looked up at her instrument of death, and her last conscious thought before the instant crushing pain was, 'my god its so BIG!'

During the following years, the procedure in which tired old women each picked a spot, swooned and were then silently crushed into the black metal, continued without respite. Twelve years alone, consumed 600,000 sisters, beginning with Miriam. All had the tiny red crystals implanted in their skulls. Each woman died at a preplanned spot on the same level.

Thirteen years after Miriam died, and as the second huge segment of the wall was begun, a solitary figure began its trek down along the northern cliff face that led to the northwest corner of the black wall. It moved slowly, methodically, and with a dedicated purpose, stopping, starting, and stopping and so on. Once on the living wall it moved inward exactly two kilometers and then proceeded to climb straight upwards.

When the figure reached the overhang that was the beginning of the second level, it began to move outward until it was suspended like a microscopic spider. Then it reached its predetermined spot and began its long-term task, first removing several strange

instruments from one of its large pouches and beginning the building procedure of what was to be the refuge of a Nashramh courier over 100,000 years into the future.

For 40 years the lone figure, Sister-Magum Ruby of the Sacred Stone, labored to fashion this hidden sanctuary from the very fabric of hell itself. She was not alone, for she was aided by more than 3,000,000 of her sisters who died there, beginning with Miriam. Each had placed her tortured and defiled body in the path of certain death, and each took her red crystal to a predetermined spot.

From these bodies and souls, Ruby fashioned both the sanctuary and the nervous system that would shortly interface with Borgdragon's huge electro-biological computer system. In so doing, Ruby collected all of her dead sisters' souls into herself by joining their microcrystals with her own so that they became as one. Through the strength and determined will of the dead sisters, each of the microscopic red crystals with its inhabiting soul began a slow trek from and through the substance of each sister's crushed body to reach the starting point: Miriam's flattened skull. Thus each woman had, by positioning herself for a premature death, become a component of an elaborate electronic circuit that would eventually permeate the entire fortress.

When Ruby, in her isolation, collected and joined these red stones, she learned that many were subtly different from what they should have been. Those sisters who were unable to make it to their assigned spots, either because of their inability to move or due to an early death, were replaced by an unknown entity who had been monitoring their progress and watching them carefully. Thus, unknown to the sisterhood, many men from the Ansharim Brotherhood united with their sisters in distress in an act of supreme sacrifice.

Three million sisters and brothers made up the primary circuit that began with Miriam and ended with Ruby. More than 1,000,000 more sacrificed themselves to complete the circuit array on various levels before the fortress was finished. But, 110,000 years in the future, they were all destined to leave this hideous place, embedded in the body of a small, diseased, sisterhood courier.

Until that distant time arrived, they patiently watched and waited, learning the ways of Gensargon and his black legions. And

when an occasional brother or sister was captured and butchered by the black ones, they too were rescued by this living circuit, the last being Sister-Magum Claren Demorah. After her, they and hundreds of billions of hapless slaves who died there would be avenged, and their imprisoned souls set free. The black ones never suspected their fall, but that day would come. Miriam and all of those millions of men and women who joined her in this ultimate sacrifice would be vindicated.

* * *

29:35-06 JERIN 6136-7N5

The fire receded in its brightness, but never again would it return to its previous tiny flicker. Miriam, the girl grown old and broken in spirit, had finally awakened to complete the Magum. Her adjustment to this new dimension of living experience would be a long process, but the light of her soul had at last emerged to fulfill the ancient prophesy, for she would be the red thread winding her way through the fabric of temporal history. Hers was to become the smile in the looking glass.

And Arden Ardel's faery flowers shone brightly and laughed with joy, for she was one of their own.

Chapter 10

Embassy

No battle is ever won by leaders only interested in strategy and tactics . . . success is based on logistics, without which an extended force soon fades to insignificance. . . .

There is another dictum with regards to winning battles which experienced officers all understand . . . every plan for success must have at least three plans covering defeat . . . that's what military planning is all about. . . .

09:00-03 MAGUM 6144-7N5

The Klikah-Lal remained on station for another eight years, both observing and measuring Adam Belial's progress. It was obvious the black legions hadn't made deep inroads into the seventh-arm rim. They were just beginning to seed its many primitive worlds with subversives.

The only real strength the black ones had marshaled in the area appeared to be a small fleet. It was composed of six squadrons of 90-kilometer-long destroyers and two battle groups of four light cruisers and 20 auxiliary warships each. The enemy had 90 operational strike vessels, including ten 58-kilometer-long deep probe scouts.

The numbers were pretty accurate, but weren't absolutely certain, although the Nashramh's deep probe operations had gone to great lengths to observe and record them. The sisterhood couldn't verify that mammoth battle cruisers weren't hidden in either dense areas of space matter or built into moons. However,

the absence of widespread activity within this area of the seventh-arm rim did not suggest their presence.

In addition, enemy operations in this sector didn't fall into the norm of their battle tactics. The enemy was known to use surprise and large numbers of massive battle cruisers in their attack formations during general assaults on G.C.C. installations and naval units.

None of this activity appeared to be taking place in the seventh-arm rim. Oddly, reports indicated that the sixth-arm rim was also free of these tactics, where the black ones held their greatest sway. Council Central understood that the enemy intended to gain control of as many worlds as possible by covert military actions and active use of subversive elements within each population group. Otherwise, they appeared to be avoiding open confrontations with the G.C.C. and local systems. Nashramh military analysts determined this was a tactic to cloak their true strength in the sixth-arm and to disguise the thrust of their activities.

Despite Belial's carefully planned maneuvers to disguise his activities, sisterhood analysts were developing a well-rounded picture of his overall plans in the sixth-arm rim, and his actual military posture in the area. Belial's operations on the seventh-arm rimworlds included, on the other hand, a new seeding venture which wouldn't develop into anything major for 10 to 15 thousand years.

Nashramh analysts discovered the enemy's sub-binary drives were far superior to Galactic Common Confederation units. By closely monitoring the enemy's movements from hidden locations, the Klikah paced several of their destroyers whose destinations were accurately predetermined from previous observations and intercepted signals. Once the black ship disappeared into the sub-binary, the Klikah made for the same destination. Once there, she found another hiding spot in the area, usually in low orbit above a moon near the target world, and waited for the enemy craft. By measuring elapsed time required for the black vessel to transit, Quorib and Yee determined that the enemy vessels traveled at a factor to 280,000 times the speed of temporal light, compared to the G.C.C.'s 4,000 to one. The sisters aboard the Klikah and at Council Central were impressed by this technology, which,

although good, didn't match the Nashramh's 'Advanced Robel III' drives.

Miriam watched Quorib plot the line of departure of an enemy ship, having never seen one of the gigantic warships other than from intelligence photos, she was awed by their foreboding appearance. This one, illuminated on the viewscreen, was a light cruiser, 182 kilometers long and as black as the void itself. Only the starfields behind it disclosed its presence visually.

The cruiser appeared to be made of some dull black material, like Borgdragon's wall. Miriam wondered if it too, was alive with the souls of billions of slaves. It had the same incredible reek of complete wrongness. The black shape seemed to have come from an entirely alien kind of reality. Only the light from its softly glowing shields dimly illuminated its dark surface.

Quorib was fascinated by the enemy vessel as well, and she told Miriam about the massive ship as they studied it together. Miriam knew all ships of every navy, whether on planetary surfaces or in space, were always referred to as 'she'. But these mammoth vessels from Samael's empire were so alien and vile that they lacked any feminine comparison. Like the enemy, Adam Belial, the sisterhood identified them as 'he'. Miriam understood why primitives were petrified when they encountered these relentless and terrible specters that blended with the void as if they belonged to the abyss itself.

The Klikah and her sister ships in the seventh-arm also watched, with great interest, suspected Ansharim vessels' seeding operations. Miriam guessed that the Tibot was seeding, too, although no one examined the equipment on board. Obviously, some Odomak and other pioneer groups had already been deposited on more than 100 primitive worlds for a much greater experiment. Evidence of remote observation and staging bases left no doubt that the Ansharim were seriously attempting to influence the area.

While aboard the Klikah-Lal, Miriam reported everything she observed and learned back to Council Central regularly, discussing in detail the various enemy movements with Ruby and others. Everyone at Council Central remained noncommittal about anything dealing with the Ansharim operation, so Miriam reported her observations without begging the question.

She was immensely curious about the Ansharim now, especially about their seeding operations. As she studied one of these distant star systems in the navigator's high-gain gridscreen, Miriam had the odd feeling that she would someday become a part of these very operations. She felt they were far more important than they appeared.

After a total of 14 years of uninterrupted deep probe activity in the seventh-arm, Council Central ordered the Klikah back to the Nashramh's rim operations fleet station SM384V for refitting.

When Miriam received the orders, she knew this would be no mere restocking of supplies and a fortnight of rest and recuperation for the crew. On the voyage back, the Klikah would deposit her on a rimworld named Katolnol Station, which orbited the blue sun, Efco VIII.

Upon receiving the orders, Miriam was curious about her assignment, but asked no questions. Immediately after she reported the orders to Yee, Quorib entered the new coordinates into the ship's navigational computer and the Klikah headed home. Everyone was in a holiday spirit, although they never let their guard down.

Nine weeks later, Miriam arrived at the Nashramh Embassy at the capital city of Katolnol Station. The sprawling city stood beside a large winding river, near the eastern seaboard of its second major continent.

With the wind ruffling through her hair, Miriam stood alone on a balcony overlooking the turbulent green river. Below her, the wild green torrent bucked and slapped angrily in concert with chilly gusts of wind, and Miriam shivered, listening to the interweaving sounds that brought life to her surroundings. Shivering again from a fine chill spray, which flew up over the massive stones bordering the river, she turned to leave. Her hair swirled wildly into her eyes, as she made her way up a flight of shallow stairs and onto the rustic street corner above.

The rambling capital city of Katolnol Station was named Helm Nofim after an ancient warrior who'd built his central fortress here. Most of the ancient structure now stood in ruins. Across the river, Miriam could see the lofty stone spires and arches of Castle Nofim between the hills.

Gusts of chill wind swept up little swirls of dust on the street, blowing over and around Miriam's lone figure. Pushing back her

tousled hair, she determined to have a closer look at Castle Nofim when time allowed. "Jenn would say it's filled with ancient mysteries and promises of beauty and adventure," she murmured to herself..

Katolnol Station was a blue world, frozen at its polar regions and cool to temperate at its equator. Its rainfall during the local 262-day year, reached a minimum two meters at Helm Nofim. Fortunately the river ran deep, and high stone levies prevented flooding during the rainy months.

Miriam enjoyed her stroll through this part of the city, while she waited for permission to continue on to the embassy. It seemed that whoever ran the embassy knew she'd been on shipboard duty for a long period and needed some breathing time.

As she walked along the river, she noticed the native citizens were a colorful population, with skin colors ranging from light orange to dusky green. They had been a squabbling lot in the distant past, with traumatic racial problems. This, in time, was resolved. Now they engaged in trade and traveled the galactic commercial circuits in search of profit and adventure. They specialized in foods, liquors, and spices.

Sighing, Miriam returned to her waiting lighter. Her hour to stroll was almost up. After a security check, the craft lifted off.

Parting from her friends and shipmates of 14 years was difficult. Miriam would especially miss her gentle friend, Quorib B'Nussoh, who was dear to her. Miriam found Quorib to be much like her old friend Rinim Poodor in one respect; the little reptilian woman fancied teas of all kinds, and like Rinim, wanted to share her pleasure with others. Miriam was amazed to see the navigator's private chest stocked full of tea packets, and learned that the rest of the crew also enjoyed visiting Quorib and her teas. It was their one small store of luxury and civilization in the loneliness of empty space.

As for Miriam, she and Quorib spent many happy hours together off duty and on.

Miriam nodded sadly; she knew that someday in the distant future she'd meet her friends again.

The lighter landed so smoothly that Miriam, caught up in her memories, didn't know until the pilot announced their set down over the comm-link.

She was met outside the lighter by a large woman, who shook her hand cordially and greeted her. "Welcome to Helm Nofim Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah. I'm Sister Oaaja Lau and we've been expecting you."

Miriam replied with a smile. "It is good to meet you. Thank you for coming to greet me."

Oaaja smiled broadly, and soon they were chatting comfortably while the woman led her to her new apartment.

Oaaja suggested they share a meal before Miriam's introductory briefing.

"It will be a long night," she declared amiably, pulling a precooked meal out of the oversized oven. "You will meet your staff and receive your initial briefings."

Until now, Miriam had no idea of what her assignment, would be. "I understand that I'll be attached to a planning function, located here at the embassy."

Oaaja smiled. "You'll receive the details at the briefing."

The two ate their light meal, which Oaaja had prepared earlier, and chatted about the city and its colorful inhabitants. Miriam was especially interested in learning about the consequences of the heavy annual rainfall and how the people dealt with the potentially catastrophic flood situation. Oaaja told her about the well-planned damming and irrigation systems used all around the planet.

Oaaja, herself, was a native of Helm Nofim. She didn't actually tell Miriam this, but it was obvious that this woman with light green skin and deep brown hair and eyes had spent much of her present life in this lovely city. She chatted so enthusiastically that Miriam was moved to an equal enthusiasm.

Sister Oaaja was apparently a composite personality, a binary-eight, and a respected scholar. Her duties at Helm Nofim Embassy were centered on long-range logistic support for Nashramh fleet operations.

"Right now we're short-handed and quite busy," she stated with a laugh, "so I didn't have to get into a fistfight over who would meet you. Believe me everyone else had the same idea."

Miriam laughed. Every place where Nashramh sisters were stationed, it was the same. Everyone could barely wait to meet a new Magum.

After supper, the two proceeded to the embassy quartermaster supply where Miriam was measured for her new official wardrobe.

Formal social activities as well as planning functions were required during this assignment, so she was fitted for the special uniform of a senior admiral along with mess dress. Surprised, Miriam remembered that rank was merely an illusion for other eyes. Yet, long ago, when she first met her friend Sister-Magum Vargo Noyen and had seen her in a similar uniform, Miriam hadn't imagined that she herself would one day be in the same position.

As Miriam entered the Embassy's security section two unsmiling sisters thoroughly checked her over before permitting passage. She had already noticed that wherever she went, there were armed security personnel and multitudes of surveillance and alarm devices. The entire embassy was literally an armed camp, with hard-eyed guards everywhere.

By the time Miriam arrived at her staff meeting, she was profoundly curious about her new duties. Escorted by Oaaja, she entered a large, comfortable room furnished with overstuffed padded chairs and a long ebony-topped conference table.

Six women waited for her, her core staff of five senior officers and one adjutant, Sister-Lieutenant Pehi Lauten. The doe-eyed Pehi walked over to Miriam and introduced herself. "Our Ambassador wants to meet you later." Somewhat mystified by the message, she added, "Ambassador Poodor said not to worry, but that she will bring her own. Do you know what this means, Sister Miriam?"

"Yes, I do," answered Miriam, breaking into a broad smile. "We're very old friends."

Pehi nodded. This Sister Miriam had the most intimidating eyes she'd ever seen, but she liked the slim elf all the same. She immediately felt comfortable.

The briefings were detailed and well-organized, and Miriam recognized some of the intelligence information supplied by the Klikah. One of the staff officers, a kindly-looking woman who looked more like some lucky child's grandmother instead of a high-ranking intelligence officer, paced back and forth in front of a mirror-screen as she related various sets of detailed information. The blue screen displayed images that corresponded to what she was discussing, and a glowing holographic projector at one side displayed three-dimensional views of the operational arena under discussion.

"It appears the main thrust of enemy activity is strung out along the middle and trailing edge of the sixth-arm of the galaxy. This area is the outer border of the Galactic Common Confederation's trade zone and within the Nashramh's outer proctorate perimeter. The real problem now, is to pinpoint the exact time and place the enemy will concentrate his invasion elements, and the direction from which his main thrust will come."

Sister-Commander Omesh Criah paused slightly. "This invasion will have to be repelled with the combined efforts of every confederation within the sixth-arm. Hopefully, the defenders will include forces from the first-arm's Ansharim Brotherhood. The black ones have needed more than 10,000 years to lick their wounds and regroup after the loss of their three stronghold fortresses. According to Council Central, the enemy will probably rely on the massive back-up and logistic resources recruited from the outer rimworlds they control."

The holographic arena lit up, fascinating Miriam with its colors and precise dimensions.

"We surmise," Omesh continued confidently, "that the best area for the enemy to make his main thrust is in the more concentrated star groups on the leading edge of the sixth-arm. This is in or around star group UP8816U. We have observed systematic covert movement in the area for more than 400 years, and believe the enemy has installed an ultra-secret facility in one of the smaller star systems in the group. This facility is, we suspect, a high-gain beacon, utilizing frequencies unknown to us."

The holographic display focused on a large group of stars in the leading edge of the rim. "We can only make educated guesses about this facility, since none of our vessels have penetrated the zone and none of our deep-probe operatives have been heard from once they've entered the area. On the other hand, we have circumstantial evidence indicating the existence of such a facility. The most important being the virtual sealing-off of the area for so long a time, and the enemy's complete absence of visible action on the periphery."

Miriam studied the blue screen behind Sister Criah. She noted that the frontal area to be patrolled measured some 16,000 light years by 4,000 light years in the leading edge alone.

Sister Criah continued as both the holograph and view-screen refocused to meet her subject.

"Either a diversionary or secondary thrust can be expected in the middle of the elliptic on the rim section. This is four degrees above and 12 light years behind what we suspect to be the target area. There's a great deal of enemy activity in the zone, and we expect he'll use all the resources in the area to draw our main forces away from his intended thrust point. We also expect his fleet to be spread along a 14-light-year stretch, occupying a frontal band 2.5 light years wide and six light years deep. This would occupy a general field of hostilities of 210 cubic light years for the main thrust. This, coupled with diversionary actions in the middle of the elliptic, will increase the field of hostilities to more than 30,000 cubic light years, which is beyond any of our means to defend in depth. Therefore, we must create an early warning system, working in conjunction with our outer RAD Stations, to provide our G.C.C. allies time to intercept the main invasion fleet. We will earmark special tactical groups to range through the back areas and disrupt enemy activities there. These groups will include our own vessels, because of their Robel III capability and our Magum communications network."

Criah altered her screen display before continuing with her presentation. "Because of the relative distances involved, the enemy has the advantage of entering temporal space at any point along the rim without detection. There just aren't enough of us to go around. As it is, the combined fleets are strung out pretty thin too. Our current estimates of G.C.C. combat-ready vessels, although they seem high indicates they have 12,160,000 of all classes."

Criah continued to detail each of the G.C.C.'s strengths and weaknesses as the blue mirror behind her displayed rows upon rows of statistics and performance factors for each class of vessel. She emphasized the slowness of G.C.C. vessels, which traveled at 4,000 times the speed of light, and the time factors required to move large contingents into a given battle area from their far-flung patrol stations.

"Right now, we're in the beginning stages of placing our operational deep probe vessels into service out beyond the rim. We plan to station these deep probe scouts to detect any enemy movements and to determine their frequency of appearance, concentration of activity, and if it is possible, the direction from which they arrive and their targeted destination. The probes we'll

use will be small, and if all goes well, they'll be outfitted with a newly designed cloaking device which, we understand, is in the making. We suspect the enemy has come from such a great distance that he must enter temporal space far outside the rim to make course corrections. This suspicion is reinforced by our speculations that a high-gain beacon was constructed in star group UP8816U to aid the enemy fleet's navigational corrections. If this is true, we can intercept their movements and notify our G.C.C. allies long before they arrive in the projected battle area."

As the information continued to flow, with each of the staff officers submitting different reports, a slow disquieting chill settled over the conference room. Neither the warm colors of the soft cushions nor the mugs of hot beverages could fight this sense of deep cold.

Miriam listened carefully, and asked questions as each woman gave her report. All knew she was a Sister-Magum and, therefore, probably knew everything already, but in this they were mistaken. She asked questions to clarify things she didn't understand and to become better acquainted with her new staff's way of thinking.

Each officer was sound and skillful in her own field, and Miriam was both impressed and comfortable with their maturity of thought and analytical abilities. She felt certain she was joining a very professional and sophisticated intelligence-planning team.

Sister-Captain Nafar Ania presented the in-depth enemy communications analysis. Nafar was a thin, mousy-looking woman with dull blond hair and sea-green eyes. She had a habit of slumping, caused by an old spinal injury. Miriam learned from her, and partially from the Klikah's own reports, that the greatest intensity and concentrations of enemy signals came from the direction of the faint galaxy TBX15DU, which lay forward and below the elliptic of their Starset's Galaxy's sixth-arm.

This fact in itself was frightening news. Although the Nashramh already knew that Samael's black legions of light didn't originate from the 'Starset', this fresh news pointing to their outside origin brought on the old fear. Any enemy who could move from one galaxy to another with such ease as the legions of Adam Belial was formidable indeed. Of course, with its own sub-binary drive capabilities, the Nashramh could move these distances as well. However, too little of the 'Starset' was as yet explored and civilized, and this in itself would take eons to accomplish. Any race that

could subdue its own galaxy, as the forces of Adam Belial were suspected of having done, and then try to conquer another, was awesome.

Miriam shook her head in wonder; her own intensive study of Borgdragon's operations and library tapes told her much about the dogma and methods used by the black ones, and, she suspected, a little about their home galaxy. Unfortunately, her knowledge of Borgdragon's records was nothing compared to the realities of Adam Belial's true age and power in the scheme of things.

Ania continued her report in greater detail, speaking in her whispery voice and gesturing towards the holographic arena which focused on the revolving coordinates.

"According to recent reports from our survey scout destroyer 'Maribol-Tae', which has been on station at the extreme rim of the sixth-arm in operational zone OV6144K, it appears the black ones are entering the temporal plane between 120 and 140 light years beyond the rim." She then detailed how the Maribol's CIC analysts viewed a number of minute explosions at these far-away coordinates, using specialized sub-binary sensing devices, and identified them as originating from several black cruisers breaking into temporal space. The CIC officer aboard the Maribol-Tae determined that these explosions were caused by flaws in the enemy's shields. This permitted an analysis of the vessels' spectral signatures, which were matched with known data.

"As Sister Criah pointed out, the black warships apparently stop to alter their course before entering our galaxy for their final destination. This fact, coupled with our own observations of their entrance into temporal space so far out, suggests they come from a distant galaxy, perhaps beyond TBX15DU. They require at least a 130 light year entry factor to safely allow for navigational errors."

The briefings continued for 12 long hours before the scheduled agenda concluded. Miriam returned to her quarters for a snack and some well-deserved rest. As soon as her head hit the soft downy pillow, she was fast asleep.

"Arise, my dear! Arise! You have great and wondrous things to do today!" Rinim sang out as she rolled Miriam out of bed. "Breakfast is on, sleepyhead. Let's get to it."

Miriam snapped awake on the soft bedroom carpet and broke in a wide happy grin. Jumping up, she hugged the strange-looking

woman with grey, pasty skin and deep green eyes. It was Rinim, her wonderful friend Rinim!

Suddenly Miriam remembered back to when she was a child at Ling Wall; when she'd felt like this, the summer holidays, with their promise of adventures and fun, were just beginning. Only this feeling was better.

"You see? We got you back together," said Rinim making a serious attempt at a smile. "It took us a little time to find you, but we did it all the same," she gurgled.

Miriam laughed happily; it was good to see her old friend Rinim again. More than 10,000 years had passed, and Rinim probably lived in several different bodies since they last met. Yet surprisingly, she still looked the same. She had the same pasty skin, grey-green hair worn in a tight bun, stumpy arms and legs, and her funny little mouth that never smiled but made odd shapes as she articulated words. Oh yes, it was as if the wonderful holidays and summer camp had begun again.

Rinim looked closely at Miriam, who now stood at full elf height of 1.6 meters. Then she gurgled, "I guess we can no longer call you Shorty, eh?"

Miriam nodded, and they went to the kitchen for a hearty breakfast. Over their leisurely meal, they talked about past times and the whereabouts of old friends. Miriam told Rinim about her experience as Smon on Lublinog and about Ling Wall and Jenn.

"I shall have to meet this funny little elf someday," Rinim gurgled happily. "She sounds like a good and loyal friend to have."

Miriam nodded sadly. She missed Jenn.

Rinim then went on to discuss her own identities since they'd last met. She'd spent several hundred years as a ship's captain on a scout destroyer as a change of pace, although Miriam didn't know what the change was from. She'd never known the extent of Rinim's duties at Council Central, but surmised that someday she'd learn when she had a need to know. Rinim returned to Council Central for two more millennia, toured the other academies, and was in diplomatic circles for quite a while. Four thousand years ago she'd been the signator on the Nashramh treaty team for G.C.C. treaty renewals, although she didn't discuss this very much. She didn't need to, for Miriam held this same position more than 6,000 years earlier. Then Rinim went back to the subject of Miriam's long stay on Lublinog.

"We would have gotten you back sooner, but a major war broke out in the star systems surrounding Lublinog and we had no way of finding out whether you'd ever reached your destination. Finally, after 8,000 years, we were able to secrete two Magums onto that planet and several others in nearby systems so we could find you and our other lost sisters. After we found you, we learned that you'd waited 10,000 years before entering a new body, and this was why we had no sign of you for the 2,000 years we were present on Lublinog. After we found you, we also located Pivar Ak. Your other sister, Lider Aden, was recovered right away."

Miriam nodded; Ruby told her this much shortly after she was born.

"As you already know, we figured out how to duplicate the alterations the Gale Robel underwent, and we now have the exceptional, if not extraordinary, Robel III sub-binary drive. This feat in itself took several thousand years of hard work and rethinking of our basic understanding of the ethereal-temporal complex. The scout destroyer which I commanded, named after the old Gale Robel, was the first live experiment of its operational capabilities. Fortunately all went well, and neither I nor my Magum counterpart, were separated as you had been."

"I wonder just what it was, or who, we encountered on the Gale Robel?" Miriam asked in wonder, remembering her strange experience.

"So do I" laughed Rinim. "But I'm just happy to have you back in one piece. Besides, Ruby showed all of us Magums what you, Sola, and Yanna saw during that warped time period. It was hideous . . . different . . . yet, in a way, very beautiful."

Miriam agreed, shivering; although the things she'd experienced in her delirious vision hadn't seemed evil in any way, they had been as terrifying and alien and wrong as Samael's legions of light, although in a completely different sense.

"It seems odd to me that as old as Ruby must be, she has never encountered anything quite like that before," Miriam wondered aloud.

"Oh, my dear," said Rinim, "there is much in this galaxy we haven't as yet encountered. I was more than 3,000,000 years old when Ruby was first born, and I have never encountered anything like it myself, not even when I presided over Council Central during Ruby's confinement in Borgdragon's wall."

Miriam started to speak, but stopped short, fearing she may have heard something she shouldn't pursue.

"Oh, speaking of encountering people," Rinim continued, "you have another friend from our fleet liaison at this embassy. She left last week on an extended assignment with the G.C.C. naval planning section at Thorp Able XI, but wanted me to welcome you home for her." She gurgled happily. "By the way, her name is Sister Drubb . . . Cecil Drubb. Do you remember her? She says that you kicked the stuffings out of her once."

Miriam laughed. "Yes, I do. It sure is a small galaxy, isn't it?" So, she mused, "Cecil is a full-fledged sister now. Good."

"Yes. And she had the feel of a binary-three about her."

Miriam was happy to hear this; Cecil had found her way in the sisterhood, and very successfully at that. She hoped to see her one day soon, and was sorry she'd missed her by a week. They could have caught up on old times and taken time to get reacquainted.

The two good friends talked together for another hour until Miriam had to report to her duty station. They were to have breakfast together each week for many years to come and to enjoy many a deep and interesting discussions. Rinim always brought something interesting to drink including one of Miriam's favorites, known as 'Jenny's Treat'.

Miriam took up her new duties in the situation planning section of the embassy, and worked on developing Nashramh deep probe operations outside of the sixth-arm rim. She soon learned just why the embassy was so heavily guarded. The secret plans developed here were dangerous ones. From her initial briefings, she'd concluded that without an accurate early warning system directed at enemy movements into the outer rim, no realistic defense was possible. The only place to intercept enemy movements was outside the rim itself, and this must be accomplished with deep probe vessels capable of long observational tours of at least 150 light years beyond the outermost star systems. The area to be covered was just too great, and G.C.C. naval capabilities were too limited to effect rapid movements on short notice.

She and her staff developed a system of deep probe grids using special cloaked scout vessels to expand the outer rim coverage by a factor of four, without increasing in the number of long-range picket ships. The Nashramh fleet was small, consisting of:

5,000 Class II Deep Probe Cloak Destroyers,
82,000 Class III Deep Probe Command Destroyers
106,000 Class I Fleet Scout Destroyers
700 mortuary vessels and their auxiliaries
100 Class I Fleet Repair Vessels
40 Class II Fleet Repair Vessels
100,000 Class I Scout Freighters
98,000 Class II Scout Freighters

All classes have various limitations on their range and fighting capabilities.

In all, there were approximately 392,000 vessels of various types, spread out over a quarter of the galaxy and through thousands of star systems. These ships were already spread too thin. Even though new vessels were constantly being built in secrecy, this probably would add up to only 2,000 more advanced technology ships by the time the main thrust of the invasion came.

To keep their new-ship construction as secret as possible, the Nashramh always replaced its older vessels, or those lost in action, with new ships bearing the same names and descriptions. Commercial vessels were used whenever possible, even though they moved at a snail's pace of 4,000 times the speed of temporal light.

Pehi sat across from Miriam, busily sipping at her thin soup and reading the latest sports results in the daily bulletin.

"You know," she muttered, chewing a bite of toasted bread, "I think these games are fixed. Every time the Rock Busters are in line for a big win, then kapow some idiot drops the ball one centimeter from the goal line. Now, doesn't that sound like it's rigged?"

She went on reading without waiting for an answer, since Miriam never paid attention to sports anyway.

The two of them had become good friends since they'd met, 33 years ago. Both had a great deal in common, and ate lunch together every day at different restaurants down the street from the embassy.

Right now, they were waiting for Miriam's friend, Lauois, who Pehi called, 'Letch', to join them. Lauois was an aging man of 671 years, which was why he was one of the few men stationed at Katolnol Station and not with the combined navies. Besides his advanced age, he suffered from serious battle wounds now beyond

repair. Otherwise, he was a trusted Nashramh associate, holding the rank of Fleet Captain. He was a valuable and experienced tactical planner.

Lauois and Miriam had first met at a formal occasion 30 years ago, and become good friends. Their physical relationship was a fulfilling extension of this friendship, and the two took many camping and resort trips as short private vacations together. Lauois was both charming and witty and loved to talk about anything and everything, especially ideas. He was very dear to Miriam.

Miriam also learned another thing from this relationship with Lauois; Pehi was envious. Single men were so scarce, that a young, vivacious girl like Pehi had to do without the male companionship so necessary to her. She found this out when Pehi nicknamed him 'Letch'.

"Why do you call him Letch?" Miriam asked, a little bit irritated by what she thought was an insult.

"Because I was hoping he'd get the hint and share himself," Pehi answered, only half jokingly.

Lauois didn't share himself and Pehi was still envious and frustrated.

Finishing her paper, Pehi glanced across at Miriam, who sat sipping her favorite spiced tea and staring out the restaurant window. Then Pehi's eyes widened; behind Miriam, talking to a waiter, was the best looking naval officer she'd ever seen. More enchanting to her was that he looked elfin like Miriam!

"Hey, Mir, get a load of the dream elf behind you," Pehi breathed. "Oh, he's luscious." Maybe, she thought to herself, if Miriam got interested in this beautiful guy, she could get Letch. Or, better yet, she could land this dream elf herself!

Miriam looked at her, not understanding. Pehi tapped her on the arm, insisting, "Hey, Mir, take a look at this one or you'll hate yourself for missing the chance."

"All right, all right," Miriam replied, turning to look. She expected some warty creature, knowing Pehi's loneliness and need for a man of any description. "This had better be. . . ."

Their eyes met, with instant recognition. Neftalak B'Mesziah excused himself and strode over to the women's table with a broad smile. "Miriam? Miriam B'Mesziah?" he laughed. "How are you? May I join you?"

"Well now, isn't this a small galaxy?" Miriam laughed, while extending her hand. "It's good to see you, Neftalak."

Pehi's eyes widened even more, if that was possible. Miriam knew this dream elf? She was flabbergasted.

"Please do," Miriam replied, gesturing to an empty chair. He pulled it away from the table and sat down.

The two elves talked together for over an hour, and Pehi sat admiring Neftalak from the sidelines, flirting whenever she had the chance. Neftalak had been on Katolnol Station for a month now, and was just leaving for his new assignment on Styx Able IV Naval Station, some 500 light years distant.

"What are you doing here, Miriam? Or is it a secret?" he asked with seeming innocent curiosity.

"No secret," replied Miriam. "I'm with the Nashramh Liaison Engineering Group, working on facilities repair."

Pehi remained silent; she could easily see that the boss was playing it cool with this guy, whoever he was, and she was going to keep out of it. But, boy, she sure wished. . . .

"Is that an important position?" asked Neftalak, a little puzzled. Something wasn't right here. He thought Miriam had a far greater potential for something more than a facilities engineer.

"It is to me," she said candidly. "Architecture and design have always been my first love, believe you me, and it isn't an easy job. Not prestigious, but hard."

Something about Neftalak's attitude and pointed questions bothered Miriam, especially since he was a senior lieutenant in the G.C.C. Navy. The G.C.C. naval fleet in itself was fairly enlightened, but she was aware there was a distrust of the Nashramh that presented it with internal problems, much as the Odomaks displayed over the past several millennia. She also knew that elfish men, through their innocence and makeup, were easily corrupted by the ways of the navy, and she sensed this was having some affect on Neftalak. Not much, but enough to show that he was interested learning more about her than was necessary.

Presently the subject turned to Jenn. Smiling, Neftalak hauled out a large packet of photographic plates he always carried with him. He described their marriage at the base commander's mansion, and how Jenn was working at the Trade Monopoly's Communication Center back at Sandwick Naval Station. She too, would be transferred to Styx Able IV in two years.

Neftalak leaned back in his chair. "I've saved the best for last," he smiled. "Here are our wedding pictures, and here's my little bubble Jenn, and . . . here's who came out of the bubble!"

Miriam looked at the photos, nostalgia welling in her breast like a heavy pain. Jenn hadn't changed a bit, and the pictures were beautiful. Some showed a young man standing next to Jenn.

"We call him 'Kin', but his name is Telakin, and as you can see, he's at the Naval Academy at Sandwick Station."

The handsome young man shown in the pictures looked much like Neftalak, but had a blue tint to his black hair and lively, kind eyes. Even though she had not met him, Miriam liked Telakin immediately. Some of his true spirit seemed to shine right through the glossy photos.

The two elves talked together for another 15 minutes, until Neftalak had to leave for his ship. He shook Miriam's hand and the two bid one another farewell.

Once he'd gone, Miriam sat down again and thought about her friend Jenn and her handsome son. In one of the pictures, the young man was standing next to his mother with his elbow resting on the top of her head and holding a drink. Jenn had her arm around his waist, beaming.

Miriam thought about Neftalak as well. He seemed more than happy to share vignettes of his and Jenn's lives together with her, but she could tell he was reserved, as he'd always been when he saw her. She sighed; apparently he still didn't like her. Oh well.

Smiling, she said, "Pehi, you oversexed nut, what did you think of his son? Makes his father look homely, doesn't he?"

"True, true," agreed Pehi wistfully, her eyes dreamy. "But, I'd settle for either one without complaining."

"Are you two talking about me again?" Lauois spoke cheerily as he sat down at the table. "Sorry to be late, but I got stuck in a long meeting . . . I had to make some important decisions . . . what color our new wastepaper baskets should be and things like that."

"Lauois don't sit too near Pehi," Miriam said with a wry smile. "She's a bit over stimulated and I can't answer for her actions."

Laughing, the three left the restaurant and returned to the embassy, walking along the rain-soaked street. After working indoors most of the time, they all enjoyed the rain and always walked to their favorite haunts for lunch or an occasional night out on the town.

The Blue Thread

Now it was back to business, and Pehi didn't ask why Miriam fed the gorgeous elf so much Snorg Crap about her job here. She knew from experience that if Miriam wanted her to know something, she would offer it.

* * *

Far out on the rim trouble was brewing. Enemy activity was beginning to escalate, signaling that the invasion was near. The word was shouted out for all to hear - Sweet Sargon is coming to liberate his faithful!

Chapter 11

Test

The test of one's character and loyalty is never real until something extraordinary happens . . . usually a tragic event which we have no control over. . . .

22:00-19 ARKEM 6180-7N5

Neftalak is dead!

Jenn couldn't believe it. She'd received a communication from the G.C.C. Fleet Admiralty, which had been verified and accompanied with a post mortem honorable commendation. She just couldn't believe it. Neftalak was dead!

Jenn had been in transit to Katolnol Station for only three days when the notification came to her, and now she was confused, frightened, and in shock. She woke up in the morning thinking of Neftalak and of their future together. Then, unbidden the memory of the communication announcing his death came rushing back at her. When she was reading, eating, or taking a shower, the memory popped into her head unceremoniously, and she would begin to cry.

The mornings were the worst, when she would wake up full of hopes for the future, only to have them darkened by the memory of that damn communication.

Jenn had never felt so alone in her life, not even after Miriam disappeared and Neftalak left for college. Even during that lonely time, she had the tangible memory and hopes of seeing at least one of them. Now there was nothing. She hadn't seen Miriam for as long as she could remember, and now Neftalak was gone too.

Who was going to take care of her?

No, she just couldn't believe it - wouldn't believe it. Still numb from the terrible news, she spent all her time in the transit vessel's communications center, working on company trade messages, just to keep busy. On the days she worked especially hard, she was too tired to think about the future, or rather the engulfing void that appeared in it. The thought never completely left her mind, and it nagged at her like an aching tooth.

Neftalak was dead.

Eight months after boarding the passenger vessel 'Jiston', Jenn arrived at Katolnol Station. Eight long months of sheer hell passed, while part of her mind tried to convince her that her beloved husband was dead, while the rest masked the fact. Yet she was still unwilling to believe it, although she didn't know why. So instead she simply didn't think about it.

A significantly thinner and paler Jennanine B'Mesziah cleared customs and completed the purser's payment procedure. She turned to walk to the transportation dock when she was interrupted.

"Excuse me, please," said a dark-skinned girl with soft eyes, stepping up to Jenn. "Are you Jennanine B'Mesziah from the Trade Monopoly at Sandwick Naval Station?"

Surprised, Jenn answered, "Yes, I am. Are you from the transportation group?"

"No," said the young woman with a bright smile. "I'm Pehi Lauten. Miriam asked me to meet you and get you settled in your hotel. Unfortunately she's really tied up at the moment with work and can't come to meet you herself. However, she'll be off in another five or so hours."

Jenn's mouth dropped open and she stared at Pehi, aghast. Miriam is here? She shook her head in negation, assuming she'd heard wrong. The very idea that Miriam was here was almost as bad as . . . no! She wouldn't think about that.

Pehi sensed the elf was confused, and reaffirmed her statement as they walked to her vehicle. "Miriam would like to have supper with you." Then she drove to a Nashramh owned hotel ten kilometers from the embassy, chatting lightly with the seemingly disinterested elf.

Pehi pursed her mouth and looked straight ahead, musing on Jenn's behavior. Miriam spoke highly of this pretty little elf, but she certainly couldn't see why. The girl acted as if she didn't care.

Jenn was in shock. She couldn't believe Miriam was here, waiting for her. After all, Miriam had been so mad at her that she'd left without saying good-bye. Jenn had resigned herself to never seeing her best friend again.

Jenn closed her eyes and sighed. Before her eyes in the blackness of her inner mind, the damned notification from Fleet Admiralty flashed in bold red letters, reminding her of what she didn't want to remember:

B'Meszhiah, Neftalak
G.C.88D416684883W
Lieutenant, Navy Grade III
Killed in action (date classified)
Post mortem commendations in order
Will reserve personal effects
Notify next of kin
G.C.C.NAV.COM.FLT.GP5436D
16:00-16 ARKEM 6180-7N5

Suddenly close to tears, Jenn prayed that this was no joke, that she was indeed going to see Miriam. Perhaps her old friend could help her.

Pehi stayed with Jenn for a while at the hotel, and then returned to work. Afterwards, Jenn lay on the bed and thought about Miriam. She didn't even know if Miriam really wanted to see her again, since they had that damned disagreement so many years before. Then, smiling a little to herself, she thought about her happy childhood and drifted off to sleep.

The comm-link buzzed insistently, making sporadically harsh sounds like a swarm of bees flying through the room. Jenn awoke from her troubled sleep, somewhat confused. Where was she? Oh yes, at the hotel.

Shaking her head to clear it, she pressed the receiver lever. The screen lit up, showing Miriam's familiar smiling face. Her friend looked much older than she should for her age. Her face was shallow, almost gaunt with a hawkish nose, although her soft, calm eyes were the same.

"Welcome to our rainy little world, Jenn," she said. "Are you free for dinner?"

Jenn looked at the screen in absolute disbelief, her mouth hanging open and her blue eyes filling with tears. Maybe Miriam wasn't mad at her anymore. She didn't look like she was.

"Is that really you, Miriam?" she asked, her voice sounding somehow disembodied and strained. "Oh, God, it's been so long!"

Miriam smiled, "Can you come over, Jenn? We have so much to talk about."

Jenn stared at the screen, and suddenly reality hit her like a bolt, "Miriam, Neftalak is dead! He's dead!" She began to cry in earnest, but Miriam's oddly calm eyes glowed softly through the screen. Jenn managed to catch herself, and hiccupping a little, she cried, "oh God, I have to talk to you! How do I get there?"

"My friend Pehi will pick you up shortly, Jenn. Then we can talk, all right?" Miriam could see over that Jenn was obviously still numb with shock over Neftalak's death.

Jenn continued crying silently.

Miriam continued. "Dry your tears, Jenn. I have things to tell you."

"Yes, yes," Jenn murmured, still crying.

Half an hour later, Pehi drove the car into an enclosed area near the embassy building. Jenn was no longer crying, but she looked pale and wan, and her eyes were puffy and red.

"We can walk from here," stated Pehi with a cheerful smile. "Miriam can't wait to see you."

Jenn walked silently along beside Pehi, wondering why Miriam hadn't come herself. It suddenly seemed odd that so many women carried weapons and stopped them for identification checks every 20 meters.

Finally, the two entered an embassy elevator, where they were checked for the 15th time since entering the complex. The security people were hard-eyed and looked like they meant business. Jenn felt uncomfortable and out of place being at the wrong end of the weapons.

They exited on the 54th floor. Her eyes as big as saucers, Jenn was afraid if she opened her mouth and asked any questions somebody would get mad, so she kept it shut and just went along with Pehi. She didn't like these hard-eyed women who never smiled. She didn't like them at all.

Six security checks later, they arrived at Miriam's apartment. Once inside, Pehi took Jenn's coat and said, "Sit down, Jenn, and I'll get us both a drink. You look like you could use one."

Jenn produced a tired smile and accepted the drink. "Where are we? Why are there so many security checks?"

Pehi sat down and said, "We're at the Nashramh Admiralty Headquarters for sixth-arm operations." She sipped at her tonic and added, "Security is one of our preoccupations."

Miriam arrived within moments carrying a security pouch labeled 'TOP SECRET'. She placed it in her conference room's walk-in vault. She then returned to the living room where Jenn and Pehi sat talking.

"It's been a long time, Jenn," she said, holding her hands out to Jenn as her friend stood up shakily. Suddenly all the years that had passed them by, both happy and sad, were gone and no longer mattered. It seemed like they were still at Ling Wall, and nothing had changed.

Jenn rushed to Miriam and they gave each other a warm hug. Miriam stood back, holding Jenn by the shoulders. "You're just as beautiful as ever," she smiled. And she was. Jenn's waist length hair, was twisted into a loose chignon, and her face, pink and flushed with excitement, was still angelic and beautiful although thinner.

Tears filled Jenn's eyes and she whispered, "Oh, I'm so happy to see you, Miriam. It's been too long."

Nodding, Miriam led her to the long, plush couch and both settled themselves on it, Jenn with an unconscious grace as she smoothly swept her skirt under her. Then the two talked while Pehi got supper ready. Miriam avoided all mention of Neftalak, and when Jenn hesitatingly broached the subject, she firmly said, "We'll talk about it later, Jenn, after supper."

Jenn didn't understand her friend's brisk attitude, but the resolve in Miriam's voice closed the subject. Oddly, it didn't matter. Somehow, Miriam acted as a catalyst, and although she hated herself for it, Jenn came to understand that Neftalak was really dead. She was no longer in shock, or numb. Now she accepted the inevitable. Her husband was dead, and she had only a bleak future to look forward to. Now, at least there was Miriam.

After a pleasant supper, Miriam took Jenn's hand in hers. "Look, Jenn, there are things going on you don't know about. We're

going into the conference room now, and I'm going to show you a security recording. Mark this well. What you see and hear tonight is absolutely secret, and you are not to discuss it with anyone under any circumstances. Do I make myself clear, Jenn?" Her mouth was set grimly, and she looked directly into Jenn's eyes.

Jenn looked back into Miriam's calm, emotionless eyes and swallowed heavily. "Yes, I understand, Miriam," she agreed solemnly, accepting the oath of silence on the subject, although not understanding why. She resolved to keep this oath, just as she had kept her position in the Nashramh a secret from all. Neither her lovely son Telakin nor her husband had ever known she was a Sister Novice. Jenn frowned a little. Neftalak had never even suspected that she was in the sisterhood, even though he knew Miriam was.

Jenn suddenly realized that she'd thought his name, and it hadn't been hard to do. Oh, there'd been a twinge of sadness, of resistance. Yet, now that she had accepted his death, she could think of him again. She could remember all of the happy times they had together and be comforted.

Not knowing what else to do, she followed Miriam and Pehi into the comfortable conference room. Miriam removed a package from the vault. It was the same one she'd put in before supper, although Jenn hadn't noticed. As the three sat down in front of the room's huge, shimmering blue mirror, Miriam inserted a special recording crystal into the table's audio-visual translator. The mirror screen lit-up.

A woman's voice stated flatly, "this is a top secret document which is not to be discussed outside AT-106 Section four." These same words appeared written on the screen in large red letters simultaneous to the vocal inflections. The voice continued, accompanied by a visual presentation.

"Galactic Con-Fed Naval Destroyer 'Annabin' was dispatched on a deep probe mission into enemy-held positions in the system TH4046U of the sixth-arm rim, area 3-B. A special commando team of demolitions technicians, pathfinder troops, and a naval liaison officer was scheduled to approach and penetrate the enemy communications complex located on Theb IV of the above mentioned system. This team was assigned to destroy it with a thermal nuclear device after gaining access to enemy computer

crystals and extracting enemy code data. Project name: Biskalet Mar."

The screen showed the imposing destroyer as it was plotted into position in the system. Following were mock-ups of the distant planetary group, a focused close-up of the planet itself, and the communications facility. It then focused on the combined operations team, showing each of the demolitions technicians, the 30 pathfinders, and the naval liaison officer.

Jenn gasped aloud. The naval officer was Neftalak, a seemingly alien and hard-eyed Neftalak dressed in heavy-duty camouflaged garb equipped with a laser rifle. She sat still, stunned, really not listening until Miriam leaned over and firmly tapped her arm. "Pay attention, Jenn. This is very important."

The narrator's flat voice continued. "The commando team was dispatched by a special lighter capable of both landing undetected on the planetary surface of Theb IV and lifting off into interplanetary space. The vessel made its landing at 02:14 hours on the fourth day of ARKEM, 6680-7N5, and the team successfully penetrated the enemy complex." The bright screen showed the plotted trajectory of the landing.

"After sustaining heavy losses, the remainder of the team returned to the lighter with the enemy crystal data in their possession. The enemy facility was later detonated by the thermal nuclear device, at 19:25 hours on the 20th day of ARKEM, 6680-7N5." A statistical readout of the bomb's blast and radiation fallout characteristics appeared on the large screen with superimposed colored circles on a topographical map of the strike zone.

"The survivors of the mission were later retrieved by the G.C.C. lead destroyer, 'Rimwall', at 10:42 hours on the 20th day of ELIM 6680-7N5, and are now in transit to the G.C.C. Naval Station at Styx Able IV. Of the 54 personnel assigned to this mission, only five survived. These are:"

The screen then showed the names and disposition of each of the five survivors.

Pathfinder Lieutenant - Kupor, Drakeim - Wounded
Demolitions Technician - Agono, Lok - Wounded
Demolitions Technician - Zydek, Acey - (Sis-Mag) - Wounded
Demolitions Technician - Mand, Eggbert - Wounded
G.C.C. Navy, Lieutenant - B'Mesziah, Neftalak - Wounded

The voice continued on, but Jenn barely listened. Neftalak was alive! He wasn't dead, but alive! Somehow, part of her hadn't been able to accept his death, and now she knew why. He had never died!

Miriam tapped her on the shoulder again, and Jenn forced herself to listen as the voice droned on. But now, she felt suddenly lifted from her penetrating depression to an overwhelming elation.

Now she had both Miriam and Neftalak again!

"The survivors are scheduled to arrive at Styx Able IV Naval Station on the 10th day of TALUM, 6181-7N5." Then the woman continued to detail the rest of the mission, although Jenn couldn't concentrate. She could hardly believe her ears: Neftalak was alive! Now she could live, and she'd never take him or Miriam for granted.

"The G.C.C. lead destroyer, Annabim, was destroyed earlier with the loss of all hands. This occurred when the vessel struck a thermal mine 2.3 light years from System TH4046U, while patrolling the area until a rendezvous with the commando team could be scheduled. The Annabim struck the mine at precisely 26:36 hours on the 15th day of ARKEM, 6180-7N5." The screen displayed a simulation of the Annabim's destruction including a detailed model of the thermal mine. Pehi was impressed while she took in the information. Boy, Miriam sure had some tricks up her sleeve!

"After learning of the Annabim's destruction, the lead destroyer, Rimwall, scanned the debris of the explosion and found no survivors. For further information on the G.C.C. Destroyer Annabim, see report crystal D51000-536 BAR-1, dated 21 ARKEM 6180- 7N5."

The narrator concluded that the report had been made and recorded per paragraph 48B of the Nashramh Joint Operations Procedure UU677N by Sister-Magum Acey Zydek, who was presently assigned to the G.C.C. Combined Operations Section of Rimworld Fleet 212.

Miriam stood up, her joints crackling, as the screen went blank and then returned to the tinted blue mirror. She removed the recording crystal from the recorder then placed it carefully in the conference room vault. When she returned, Jenn was sitting still, looking at the mirror with her mouth hanging open.

"Well, Jenn," she said with a smile, patting the elf's shoulder. "I don't think we have anything to be gloomy about, do we?"

Jenn looked up, tears shining in her eyes. "He's alive, Miriam. Oh, God, He's alive. My Neftalak is alive. . . ."

Miriam and Pehi guided the stunned Jenn into the comfortable living room where Pehi thrust a drink into her hand. After a few sips of the strong liquor, Jenn began to cry, tears of relief and happiness.

Pehi glanced at Miriam and decided to go to her room and sack out.

The two elves talked deep into the night about times past, Neftalak, and the sisterhood. Miriam soon came to understand how proud Jenn was of her husband, and of her lovely son who followed in his footsteps. She also learned that she liked Telakin even more now as Jenn talked about him. Miriam looked forward to meeting this bright young man whom Jenn lovingly called 'Kin'.

Jenn nodded when Miriam told her about her order not to disclose that she was leaving Ling Wall so suddenly. She explained how she and Eaun were forced to leave without saying good-bye to any of their friends.

"You will soon learn that the Nashramh has reasons for everything, Jenn. You too might have to do things that feel wrong or that make you unhappy. If it has been asked of you, it is only because it is absolutely necessary."

"I knew it had to be something like that, Miriam," Jenn agreed solemnly. "I just couldn't believe you were that mad at me." Yet, this was exactly what she'd feared for so many years. She was happy to learn differently. Now she wanted to find some way to stay in contact with Miriam.

"I wasn't mad at anything," Miriam replied, smiling grimly. "It's just that events were and are crushing down on us, and there is so little time."

Jenn didn't really understand this last statement, but she agreed. If Miriam said it was so, then it must be.

Jenn stayed overnight with Miriam using one of the guest bedrooms. The following afternoon she was scheduled to board her transfer ship to Styx Able IV, and Pehi saw to her transportation and customs arrangements in advance. Jenn felt better about things than she had for a long time when she fell asleep that night.

She had two of her favorite people back again, which made her so happy she thought she would burst.

The next morning Jenn, Miriam, and Pehi ate breakfast together. Miriam apologized for not accompanying Jenn to the spaceport. Jenn had no idea what her job was, or why it should be so pressing. Obviously it was an important one, with a lot of responsibility.

After breakfast, the two kissed good-bye, and Miriam hugged her little friend. "Do take care of yourself, Jenn. I love you too much to think you might ever be hurt. And times are getting so bad. . . ."

Jenn tried hard to blink away her tears, for Neftalak had always said they were childish, but she just couldn't. She didn't know what Miriam meant when she said times were getting bad, but she did know Miriam knew what she was talking about. For Miriam knew everything.

Pehi left the spaceport after depositing a happy Jenn near the entrance of the transit liner, 'Goilb-Min'. She'd come to really like the lovely elf, and mused at her frail and angelic beauty, of which Jenn seemed ignorant. And, Pehi mused a little bitterly, of what she, herself, seemed to lack. She was so lonely that she wanted to cry.

Jenn finished paying the purser in advance and turned to enter the vessel. The purser stopped her and asked, "Excuse me, but I have another notation to make. May I see your identification disc again, please?"

Jenn sensed that the query was a command, so she handed it back to him. As she wondered what other notation he had to make, she was suddenly grasped roughly by two women who stood nearby. Her mouth dropped open in surprise, and she didn't even have time to think of struggling.

The purser immediately handed Jenn's ID disc to a slightly built woman who walked right past her and onto the ship, while Jenn just stared on, wide-eyed. Was someone going to pretend to be her?

"Hey!" she sputtered, confused. "You . . . you can't do this to me! I paid for that ticket and I'm not. . . ."

The whole incident happened so quickly that Jenn didn't even feel the impact as one of the two remaining hard-eyed women

brought the probe of a stun gun down on the back of Jenn's neck. No one had seen the transaction.

Jenn awakened disoriented, and shivering. After seconds that seemed like hours, she realized she was lying naked on a hard, cold floor. As her head cleared, she also noticed she wasn't alone.

Jenn was terrified beyond reason. She'd give anything to be back in Miriam's apartment or with Neftalak or just to wake up out of what must be some horrible dream. But she couldn't seem to wake up, if it was a dream, and felt decidedly worse.

As her eyes focused, Jenn saw a large, beefy woman standing over her, holding what Jenn soon learned was a neuronic whip. All she knew now was that the mean-looking woman was some sort of monster who had trapped her here and was going to hurt her.

"Don't play dead, creep," barked the woman in a harsh, raspy voice. "Stand at attention like a human!"

Although she felt sore and cold, Jenn was so terrified that a rush of adrenalin burst through her. She sprang to her feet and assumed the position of attention, memories of Eaun's drill and torture sessions still fresh in her mind.

The woman walked slowly around Jenn's rigid figure, her polished boots clicking against the hard, shiny floor. Then she stopped behind the elf, who, involuntarily flinched. Her heartbeat suddenly boomed ominously, and she was certain that the hard-eyed woman could hear it.

The woman began to walk around her again, like a cat circling a mouse. Jenn mustered what self-discipline she had to keep her eyes from flickering around the room and from licking her dry lips. She was cold; the room felt like ice, and the chill of the smooth metal floor seemed to climb up her legs like tendrils of some icy vine.

Without warning, the woman struck her on the hip from behind with the neuronic whip. The burning pain shot through the frightened elf's body, nearly knocking her down. Jenn yelped and doubled up, seeing stars as her head reeled; instantly another blow came to her other side, "Attention you scummy slut!"

This was just too much. Hot, salty tears began to stream down Jenn's pale face, and she struggled to remain at attention. She had no idea what was happening to her. Was she being punished for something? Or had those people, whom Miriam called the black

ones, come to get her and steal her soul? Oh, God, what if they were? Her body involuntarily shuddered.

"Who is Miriam B'Mesziah?" snapped the woman. "What did you see and hear in her quarters?"

Her eyes widening, Jenn clamped her jaws together and said nothing, her face now beet-red with pain. Who did this germ, (she had always wanted to call someone else this, although it didn't really comfort her now), think she was? Jenn wouldn't say anything about Miriam. Miriam was her best friend, and she'd sworn not to say anything about the recording.

The woman continued to stroll slowly around the little elf, the clicking of her shiny black boots ominous and as regular as the ticking of a clock. She asked more questions, but didn't use the whip again.

After four long hours of interrogation, which seemed more like centuries, guards led Jenn to a cell and locked her in.

Once alone, Jenn collapsed and cried. Had they captured Miriam too and killed her? Jenn didn't know much about death, but it was ominous and frightening, which was one reason she had refused to believe Neftalak was dead until the end. Death to her, whatever it might truly be, was something horrible and incomprehensible. To think that Miriam could be dead seemed somehow worse than it had with Neftalak, if that was possible. For 'Death' meant there was 'No More' of that person. And Jenn didn't think she could face that 'No More' again so soon after what she'd learned about her husband, and so soon after she'd seen her friend Miriam in the flesh and alive.

After drying her tears, Jenn looked up and around her new home. It was very small, dimly lit by some sort of translucent ceiling material. There was no shower or toilet, and she wondered if she'd be left here to die.

Her two welts from the neuronic whip didn't hurt much, except for a dull throb that made sitting on the hard floor extremely uncomfortable.

Each day, Jenn was ordered out of her cell and interrogated by hard-eyed women wearing intimidating grey uniforms and those formidable-looking shiny grey boots. The questions were always the same: who is Miriam B'Messiah? What does Miriam do for the Nashramh? What had Jenn seen and heard in Miriam's quarters?"

Jenn just cried and said nothing. She had in fact somehow convinced herself so well that she would never tell about the secrets in Miriam's quarters, that her throat literally choked up every time she even considered saying anything at all.

Other than these 10-hour interrogation sessions, which were repeated every seven or eight hours, Jenn remained alone in her cell. She led a Spartan life, being fed bread and water twice a day and allowed to use the bathroom only once each day. Otherwise, she was either intensely grilled by her grey-uniformed tormentors or locked inside her cell. Jenn slept a great deal, something she was good at, or talked to herself and her friends, Mister Grump the tree, and Ginger, her childhood doll.

This grueling schedule went on for two months, two very long months in which Jenn lost all count of days and time, for her room was always lighted. She soon began to feel she had spent her whole life here as a prisoner.

"Wake up, you! Time to start a new day!" bellowed the guard. Jenn opened her foggy eyes and groaned. "Come on, let's get to it," drawled the guard, prodding Jenn with her foot.

Jenn struggled to her feet and followed the guard, expecting another of the infamous interrogation sessions. This time she was surprised when the guard ushered her to a bathroom where she took her first hot shower since arriving at this horrible place. Boy! It felt good!

After she'd showered and washed her hair, which was dank and stringy from the filth of two months, Jenn was given a comb to use. It seemed to take forever to get her tangles out, but she finally did.

Once she was dry, another guard brought her the clothes she'd been wearing when she was captured, and a shining ray of hope formed in Jenn's mind. Maybe she'd be set free! Maybe these people had decided she would never tell her secrets, and had given up!

Jenn dressed quickly now, wondering if she'd be going home, and a strong upwelling of hope and relief filled her. But again, maybe she was being taken to another prison, or even somewhere worse.

Jenn's spirits sank again. She remembered her tortuous days here, and then decided they must be taking her some place worse than this horrible prison. She followed the grey-uniformed guard

along long empty halls until they finally arrived at the door of a suite of rooms. She was taken through an anteroom to a small office.

The older woman sat placidly behind a polished mahogany desk as guards led Jenn into her office.

"Sit down, Jenn," she said, in a soft and musical voice. "I have a few things to go over with you," she continued, unsmiling.

Jenn complied and remained silent. She was profoundly curious about this place and this woman's identity.

"So," said the woman, her voice lilting. "You're Jennanine B'Mesziah, Miriam's childhood friend." She smiled a little, then, continued softly. "I'd feel fortunate to have a friend like you." Then she looked at a document in front of her and said, "Now, down to business. You've been asked some questions about Miriam: who she is, what it is she does for the Nashramh, and what it was you saw and heard in her apartment. Is that correct?"

When Jenn heard the woman's kind remark, her hopes lifted. Then they sank again. The older woman, who had soft eyes and baby-fine porcelain skin, framed by dark grey hair, spoke to her the way Eaun used to when she was articulating something Jenn had done wrong.

"Yes," she answered in a small voice.

"Do you want to answer these questions for me?"

Jenn remained silent, since she had nothing to say. After all, Miriam was her friend and she didn't know what she did, but it was important, and it was none of their business about the recording.

The woman leaned back in her padded chair and studied the little elf, whom she realized was very pretty, even after the toll the interrogation sessions had taken on her. But she was strong, all the same. Yes, strong with tears and whimpers and close-mouthed as a seasoned veteran. Perhaps Meszian elves would eventually become an active part of the Nashramh, if the strength displayed by this one was a valid example.

Then, nodding, she murmured, "Good." Smiling she said, "By the way, I should introduce myself. I'm Sister Vynn Neg, Chief of Internal Security for Nashramh Affairs here at Katolnol Station. You've been detained here, Sister Jennanine B'Mesziah, to be tested for both your loyalty to our order, and your ability to keep our Nashramh secrets safe under conditions of duress."

She paused to allow Jenn to absorb her words.

Jenn was surprised and confused all at once. She was at Katolnol Station, still? She didn't know whether to cry or get mad, or what. She was dumbfounded to learn that the sisterhood Miriam had spoken so highly of had been so mean to her.

Vynn continued, noting the shock on Jenn's face, and spoke softly. "First of all, you don't know who Miriam B'Mesziah really is, nor do you know what she does here at the embassy. The only thing you could have answered is what you saw and heard in her quarters. But, you were sworn to silence in that case."

Jenn looked at the woman, astounded. Of course she knew who Miriam was - she was her best friend!

"Now it's time you learn the answers to the first two questions. But first, let me tell you the answer to the last one. In Miriam's quarters, you saw and heard a report by Sister-Magum Acey Zydek with respect to the raid on an enemy communications facility on Theb IV, code named, 'Biskalet Mar'. And you learned about the destruction of the G.C.C. destroyer, Annabim."

Vynn didn't add that the information had been given to Jenn, not to ease her pain and grieving from her husband's reported death, but to discover if Jenn had the inner makings of a Nashramh sister. Notice of Neftalak's death gave them this opportunity. She didn't mention this because Jenn was ignorant of the nature of the enemy and the need for such tests; Miriam had long ago informed her of this.

"Now, as to Miriam B'Mesziah," she inserted a tiny recording crystal into her desk top recorder, and the shimmering mirror on the adjacent wall swirled into a picture.

"This is a top secret historical recording", a woman stated flatly, continuing on with the rules and regulations, concerning its use. The title appeared in bold red letters across the screen and Jenn nearly bolted out of her seat. Pictures of three women were displayed next to one another and each appeared to be almost alive. One of them was Miriam!

SISTER-MAGUM MIRIAM B'MESZIAH:

22 SHABIN 6610-6N5 to 09 MAREN 7052-6N5

SMON OBOK:

19 ELIM 6053-7N5 to 29 MAREN 6066-7N5

SISTER-MAGUM MIRIAM B'MESZIAH:

15 SHABIN 6110-7N5 to -----

The recording went on to follow Miriam's life from her early confinement at Samael-Borgdragon Estate through each of her activities, including her death on Lublinog. It detailed her birth, life, and death as Smon Obok, taken from crystallized and recorded visual memories, and her life now until the present day in which she was serving as a senior admiral.

Jenn had heard of Sisters-Magum before, although she had no real conception of what one was. All she knew was that they were powerful and not to be reckoned with. The fact that Miriam was one of these powerful Magums was a little hard for her to comprehend.

It took her some time to absorb the impact of what she had just seen, and what she did understand awed her.

"Now you've learned some real secrets which you must keep to yourself, Jenn. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do," Jenn whispered.

"There's one more thing you must learn about, Jenn," said the woman without a smile. "Do you know anything about the G.C.C. vessels and those of the enemy?"

Jenn blinked, then, nodded, beginning to recite what she knew from memory, although she couldn't conceive of the physical reality of sub-binary travel.

"G.C.C. vessels travel at 4,000 times the speed of temporal light in the sub-binary, which differs from temporal space as we know it in that it borders the plasma boundary between the temporal and ethereal dimensions. No one knows how fast the black ones' vessels travel, but Miriam says that they are a hell of a lot faster than ours!"

Jenn leaned back, pleased at her memory.

Vynn almost smiled, but not quite. "Very good, Jenn, but now the Nashramh does know the speed of the vessels belonging to the black ones. More importantly, our Nashramh ships are much faster by far than both the vessels of the G.C.C. and the black ones. You will be taken to Styx Able IV on one of our vessels, and will arrive in time to meet the transit liner you were booked on. You will also be there in time to meet your husband Neftalak when his ship arrives at the base."

Jenn's eyes widened. Boy that was fast! She would get to see Neftalak soon, and in a couple of years, Telakin would be home.

With this, Vynn summoned two security operatives to escort Jenn to the spaceport, adding, "Jennanine can have breakfast on the ship. I don't think she likes our fare."

Chapter 12

Styx-Able

Stress and the rapid approach of an all out build-up for war go hand-in-hand with an undercurrent of suspicion and loss in confidence in one's allies. . . .

This sad fact applies to personal friendships as well as political alliances. . . .

03:00-29 TALUM 6186-7N5

Miriam found the approach to Styx Able IV was an interesting experience. Current Nashramh appraisals of naval strength in this solar system of 16 planets currently indicated two complete fleets of G.C.C. warships and four squadrons of Odomak deep probe destroyers deployed around two of the planets. This, if current estimates were precise, that meant there were 24,000 vessels in all. Eight hundred were heavy cruisers, 400 were medium cruisers, and the remaining being light-cruisers, all classes of destroyers, and fleet auxiliary ships. The Odomak squadrons totaled 200 vessels, 16 of which were specially designed 40-kilometer-long lead destroyers.

Looking through the viewscreen in the ship's passenger lounge, Miriam saw row upon row of warships orbiting Styx Able IV. All were evenly spaced and ready to scramble into action at a moment's notice. It was an awesome sight, since Miriam had never seen so many vessels at one time. The scene reminded her, on a much larger scale, of a dark parking lot. These vessels, however, had minute pinpricks of colored navigation lights shining out into the darkness. The time for waiting was nearly over, and the

combined fleets from throughout this quadrant had been assembling here for nine years. In fact, many of the vessels had begun their voyages from distant systems 70 years ago. Others continued to arrive each day.

Thousands of marshaling bases throughout the outer sixth-arm, such as Styx Able IV, were filling to capacity with an estimated 12,000,000 warships of all classes. The time for war, and perhaps the galaxy's last chance to ward off the black invasion, had come. The black ones were expected to attack at any time.

In support of this gigantic naval buildup, all commercial and privately owned cargo vessels were pressed into the effort. Massive amounts of supplies and services were turned toward the defense effort.

All of the fleet command wondered if 12,000,000 vessels would be enough. G.C.C. intelligence expected a major enemy offensive of massive proportions. If the enemy's vast preparations on the edge of the rim were an accurate indication, this attack would be momentous. Skill and the determination for survival might be all the G.C.C. combined fleets could use. The G.C.C. and Nashramh knew virtually nothing of the enemy's weapons systems or of his fleet capabilities. He had never, as yet, lost a vessel to any G.C.C. warship. The G.C.C. navy, totally outclassed by its superior enemy, seemed like a naked savage armed with a sharpened stick confronted by a steel battle tank.

Miriam shivered, looking out at the vast parking lot of warships as her vessel drew closer. For a prophetic instant, she saw an immense graveyard floating in space. The morbid image vanished, and she shivered again. There was still so much to do and so little time to do it. Fortunately, not everything depended on the war power of the G.C.C. navy. Without individual preparations, early detection, communication of enemy movements, and unwavering determination to fight to the end, they couldn't possibly beat the alien invaders.

The Nashramh scout freighter 'SF Michelle-Molu' positioned herself for off-loading passengers and cargo onto the G.C.C. receiving dock in deep orbit outside the fleet's protective perimeters. The G.C.C. permitted no unauthorized vessels beyond this point, under penalty of summary action from the fleet's security grid. In short, unwary vessels would be blown to atoms by

thermal mines in the security grid or by torpedoes fired from picket ships stationed on both sides of the grid. There would be no warning!

G.C.C. naval units were allowed near the wide security grid only after they were cleared by a complex security procedure. Nashramh vessels, classified in the same category as commercial freighters, were not allowed beyond the receiving dock station. This suggested that the G.C.C. Navy entertained many unhealthy opinions about the Nashramh, and considered them of little importance in general fleet actions.

The orbit of the triad docking station was placed much further out than necessary. Fleet security people feared the enemy might try to send in a vessel armed to the teeth with high-gain ionic generators and thermal mines. When fired upon, the resulting explosion could cripple numerous warships in the vicinity. Thus the receiving dock, and others like it, were stationed close enough to the security grid for transfer of passengers and cargo, but far enough away to prevent a surprise attack from an enemy posing as an incoming freighter.

Miriam cleared naval customs without any problems. G.C.C. personnel were aloof and suspicious. They were, Miriam mused to herself, becoming as paranoid and efficient as the sisterhood's security people. This was a necessary part of war, and there was no room for foolish trust or laxity at this stage of the game.

The trip down to Styx Able IV Naval Station B-Central, on the planet's surface, was uneventful. The passengers couldn't use the lounge view-screen to watch the descent. Absolute security was exercised here, with no exceptions.

The Nashramh now had 330 operational personnel stationed on Styx Able IV Naval Station B-Central. In addition, they had 42 passive and seven undercover agents stationed at numerous locations on the small world. No Magums were assigned here, which made communications with Council Central nearly impossible. Miriam would be acting as a combat intelligence analyst with the rank of Lieutenant, since it was suspected that she was already known to the G.C.C. naval security people.

As her transfer vessel docked at the naval base, Miriam thought about her friends she'd left behind at the embassy. She missed Pehi and her funny sense of humor, and Lauois, who'd comforted and helped her to face the harsh realities of the war to come. She

knew that memories of him would sustain her, for when war broke out there'd be no time for relaxation or love. All efforts would be directed at stopping the black ones.

Her mind turned back to a conversation she had with Lauois before she left Katolnol Station. He understood why Pehi always called him 'Letch', for he knew how lonely she was without any available men around. He sympathized with Pehi's situation and her loneliness, and told Miriam, "I've considered having an affair with her, you know, because she is really a good person."

"Why don't you, then?" Miriam answered, smiling.

"First of all, I'm already spoken for." Miriam smiled again, and squeezed his hand. "And second, you know Pehi. She's like a Cronlap hound; you give it a little taste, and it'll eat your whole arm off. Know what I mean?"

Miriam had laughed. "Yes, I do. That's Pehi. We really ought to send her off on a vacation to one of the naval stations where there are a lot of men." Lau nodded.

"Seriously," Miriam continued. "You ought to look into that idea. You know I'm to be transferred soon, and you'll be free, how about it?" She punched him amiably on the shoulder.

"Well, I don't know . . ." he said, a little worried. Was she serious? After all, Pehi was so excitable and hyper that she'd probably wear him out. A hundred years ago, maybe, but now, he wasn't so sure.

Miriam made him promise to think about it, and she had no illusions at all. Lau and Pehi would really get along well. They were both good people who would appreciate one another's company and affection.

Miriam passed through the internal security station without incident. Afterwards, she checked in with the base administration and received her billeting assignment. The clerk in charge explained the situation to her.

"Lieutenant, we don't have adequate bachelor officer quarters since the fleet's buildup has reached present proportions. All junior officers are, therefore, being assigned two to a bed. That is, they trade off," he added. "All duty shifts are now ten hours, but if things really get crowded and hectic, they'll be shortened to six hours, although each person will work more often. This," he explained, "is intended to keep operations on base as smooth as

possible while allowing our personnel, who are under great pressure, a less intense climate in which to work."

The clerk checked Miriam's assignment against his central roster. "You'll be working 'A' shift at Int-Com, so we'll assign you to room number BO-2118 in building AP-4104. Your bed partner will be Lieutenant Neferah B'Tziah, who is also from your sisterhood. She works on the 'B' shift at your same Int-Com group." He busily made several notations. "Will this be acceptable?"

Miriam smiled to herself. So, Neferah was here too, and she would be able to see her again after so many years, with no more misunderstandings. How had the little kitten fared, after all?

"Yes, it will," Miriam replied. At least Neferah would be a bright spot here at Styx Able IV during these uncertain and trying times.

Captain-Navigator Neftalak B'Mesziah from the fleet destroyer, 'Lisboor', strode up to the admiralty reception desk and announced himself. As the yeoman looked through his appointment tablet, he noted the captain spoke with the bearing of a combat veteran, a tough one at that.

After his return to Jenn from a mission he wouldn't discuss with her, Neftalak had changed. He was somewhat leaner and more stooped than before, although this did nothing to inhibit his dark good looks; instead it gave him an appearance of maturity. Only his eyes had really changed, and the difference was evident. Small wrinkles surrounded them and he always looked tired. His eyes never smiled, even when his lips did. His behavior, too, had changed since his return. He was more abrupt, albeit still coolly polite, and he had a hint of arrogance about him similar to most seasoned naval officers.

"Yes, Captain, Commander Grore is waiting for you. Please go right in the second door to the left."

As Neftalak turned away without a smile and strode towards the door, the receptionist notified the commander of his arrival.

Commander Tyrone Grore of G.C.C. naval intelligence for Styx Able IV combined fleet command was a short, stocky man who was balding at the top of his grey-haired head. He distinctly reminded Neftalak of the admiral in charge of Wosomon Academy back when he was a cadet; the man had the same abrupt, jovial manner about him. The commander's eyes took on a soft expression as Neftalak entered. "Sit down, Captain," he wheezed, gesturing to a chair.

Picking up a thick file, he said, "Take a look at this, and let me know what you think."

Neftalak accepted the document and sat back comfortably to study it. He smiled to himself grimly as he read each page carefully and studied the photos.

Within a few minutes he finished. Nodding slowly, he returned the document. It contained what little information the G.C.C. intelligence people could discover about Miriam B'Mesziah of the Nashramh Sisterhood. It clearly implied that the elfin sister was much more than the junior-ranking agent she appeared to be.

"Well Commander," he said slowly, pursing his lips. "I know this Miriam B'Mesziah. She attended primary and high school with my wife, Jennenine, as is noted in the file. I saw her some time ago at Katolnol Station, where she told me she was some kind of facilities engineer."

"And you believed her?" Grore asked.

"Yes and no," answered Neftalak truthfully. "I thought at the time she had greater potential than that. Besides, she was a dictatorial bully to my wife when they were children. She took advantage of my wife's naiveté and innocence, and pushed her around. This is hardly the character I'd expect to become a facilities engineer. Yet," and he paused, "when she told me about her job, she spoke as if it were the truth. I saw, at the time, no reason for her to lie to me."

"I take it you don't care for this Miriam?" affirmed the commander.

This is exactly the way Neftalak felt. He had never liked Miriam, but after he returned from his nearly fatal mission, his attitude towards her hardened for some unexplainable reason. This unreasonable dislike made him speak with such intensity.

Without pausing, Grore continued. "Do you think you could tolerate her presence if our security picture was involved?"

Again Neftalak spoke frankly. "No, commander, I don't care for her, although we've always been pleasant to each other. In fact, to be honest with you, I can't endure the damned creature." It always made him want to shake Jenn when she went on and on about how Miriam did this and that and how wonderful she was. Now, the mere mention of her name made him clench his teeth. "But, if what I suspect you're getting at is correct - that is, if you want me to keep an eye on her in my home - the answer is yes. This

situation will be ideal because we have a room, and my wife, Jennanine, would love to see the creature again, although for what reason, I don't know. But, an invitation from Jenn will serve as a good cover."

The Commander smiled, understanding just how Neftalak had become one of the few off-breeds to reach officer's rank in this navy; he had mettle and wits about him. "You are very perceptive, Captain," he nodded. "We want to know more about her and her activities. As you can see, we have a thick file on her, but nothing of substance. We can only guess that she is a very high-ranking intelligence operative for the Nashramh. It has been suggested in some circles, that she's a flag officer, possibly a Senior Admiral. However, this is only an educated guess."

Neftalak's eyes narrowed. "Commander Grore, if I had anything to tell you about her, I would. However, my wife has never mentioned anything of substance about Miriam. Knowing Jenn, she wouldn't know if the information was held in front of her nose." He smiled to himself and continued.

"I'll engineer a meeting with Miriam and arrange for her to stay with us. I think she'll bite, since we have better quarters than at the BOQ, and because she fancies herself a friend of my wife." He added the last remark was said with bitterness, although Neftalak didn't realize it.

The two continued to discuss the technical problems involved, and Grore offered Neftalak a few pointers on the close observation of suspected spies. Then, after three hours, the two men saluted and parted company.

The meeting with Miriam was no problem, and Neftalak intercepted her in the officer's mess at lunch. They talked together over the meal, and Neftalak insisted that Miriam move in with him and Jenn.

"Look, Miriam, you say that you have section 'A' shift? So do I. Also, I have a car, so transportation is no problem. Jenn will never forgive me or you if you don't stay with us. Besides, we have an extra bedroom since Kin is out on patrol. You'll also have the privilege of feeding and changing Myrnah, our little baby."

Miriam was surprised by this last remark. "You have a baby girl? When was she born? Neftalak, tell me about her."

He stopped her with a wave of his hand. "No," he stated resolutely, "Not a word until you move in. Then you can see for yourself."

Miriam readily agreed to the move, although she sensed that Neftalak was too insistent. She knew he was uncomfortable in her presence, at best, and more than likely disliked her. She suspected his superiors had asked him to do a little checking on her, but this didn't matter, since nothing she did or had with her could tell anything about her. Either way, she'd see Jenn and little Myrnah, which would certainly brighten her life here.

At the end of her first work shift, which was devoted to checking in and meeting her various staff associates, Neftalak picked her up and drove her to her quarters.

At her room in the BOQ, Miriam picked up her single bag, which contained only a spare uniform and a few toiletries, and left a note for Neferah explaining the situation. She would get together with Neferah during the next few days for some lunch and discussion. Then, bag in hand, she returned to Neftalak's car.

Jenn was beside herself with excitement. She just couldn't believe that Miriam was actually going to stay with them, although that's what Neftalak promised over the comm-link. She scurried around, cleaning up the house for the big event, occasionally bumping into walls when her imagination took her back to her childhood.

Jenn hadn't worked in any capacity since Myrnah was born. The Trade Monopoly Communication Center had been closed down for five years now, and she didn't want to move away from her husband. Anyway, it was nice to be able to play with her baby and to get to know the neighbors. Besides, there were so many neat things to do in this neighborhood, and she was always busy.

As Miriam stepped out of Neftalak's car, a little boy ran up to her and asked, "Are you really Miriam?"

"Yes, I really am," she answered with a smile. The boy whirled and ran off to his friends in the next yard, shouting and gesturing all the way. "Hey guys! That's Miriam! She knows everything! Boy!"

Neftalak winced inwardly, wondering how Jenn could think this creature was so great after all she'd experienced as a girl. Being lorded over and dictated to should not make cherished memories.

Miriam laughed, and after watching the children for a few moments, followed Neftalak to the front door. Before they got there Jenn sailed out and grabbed Miriam in an embrace, weeping with joy. Smiling grimly, and wanting to retch, Neftalak ushered them into the house and shut the door behind them. Then after prattling on for a few minutes, Jenn said, "come on, Miriam, and see our lovely little Myrnah. We named her after Neftalak's mother."

Delighted, Miriam followed her into the baby's room, which was gaily decorated with plants and dozens of stuffed and hanging toys, including Ginger. Jenn turned on a soft light, and Miriam slowly tiptoed over to stand by her at the cradle-bed.

The little girl lay asleep on her stomach, with one arm wrapped around a stuffed cat and her thumb corked securely in her mouth, just as Jenn used to sleep. Miriam suddenly felt a sense of nostalgia, almost wishing she had a lovely little child of her own. But times were becoming dangerous and all Magums were desperately needed for active duty. The luxuries of having babies just weren't in the scheme of things for Miriam. Maybe things would be different sometime in the future.

Miriam bent over little Myrnah, admiring her curly dark blue hair that tussled around her head, and her beautiful long eyelashes. She looked like an angelic, fragile little doll lying there fast asleep.

"She just turned three last Shabin," Jenn whispered proudly. "She loves to toddle all over the place and she just adores all the neighborhood kids that come over to play."

The three went back into the living room without waking the little girl. Neftalak was standing in the open door, watching warily as Miriam bent over Myrnah.

Miriam and Neftalak sat down, and after a moment, Jenn returned with two glasses of fine wine for them and a glass of fruit juice for herself. Then they talked awhile before supper. Miriam sensed that Neftalak was tense, although Jenn, who chatted happily on, didn't notice. She ignored his uneasiness and talked about old times.

After a pleasant supper, Miriam went to her room and hung her clothes in the bedroom closet, next to Telakin's clothing. Then she returned to the living room and talked with Jenn for awhile. Shortly after supper, Neftalak left for a few hours on navy business, which Jenn explained was a normal part of his job. That

night after Miriam retired and lay awake, she heard him return. Checking her watch absently, she noted that it was 28:00 hours.

The following evening Myrnah was up when Miriam and Neftalak arrived home from work. Jenn announced happily that she was changing the baby's schedule so they could see more of her, and Miriam came to look forward to this. She felt children were always a light spot in one's life, and looked forward to being, as Jenn gushed, Myrnah's 'second mummy'.

Miriam sat on the couch after returning from work, drinking fruit juice while Myrnah toddled out of her room for the first time. At first the little girl was shy and wouldn't come near Miriam. When Jenn was in the room she either hid behind her or hung onto Neftalak's leg. Later, just before bedtime, she toddled over to Miriam and showed her 'Mupsy', her stuffed cat. From that moment on, the little elf was Miriam's best friend.

Miriam loved to watch the baby play and looked forward to coming home at night. She admired Myrnah's lovely features which were punctuated by her large, dark blue eyes that looked much like Jenn's. Miriam fed, bathed, and changed Myrnah at every opportunity, loving every minute. She and Jenn spent a lot of time with the sweet little elf, enjoying each other's company in the evenings. Neftalak was always away on navy his business.

Miriam soon learned that this 'navy business' took place at the senior officer's club in the company of other women. Neftalak was definitely a ladies' man who shared himself with many a lonely wife whose husband was away on shipboard duty. It seemed that everyone but Jenn knew of his overt womanizing, and after some deliberation, Miriam decided to remain silent on the matter. Disclosing the fact to Jenn wouldn't help the situation, and it might stir up resentment. Miriam felt sick to her stomach when she first learned about it, and later felt angry.

Neferah met with Miriam often between their work shifts, and during one of these meetings, she confided in Miriam about this 'navy business'. She explained that she seriously considered killing Neftalak when she learned of his misconduct. However, one of the senior sisters on the base warned her against it, so she'd done nothing. Since then, she avoided both Jenn and Neftalak for fear of what she might say or do, and she felt rotten about it. The ironic thing, Miriam soon learned, was that Neftalak really liked Neferah, and couldn't understand why she never visited Jenn.

Miriam, too, found that she liked Neferah a great deal. The girl, who'd grown into a tough soldier, had a fondness for lilting music and storytelling. Often, when she was off duty, Neferah visited children of other friends and wove her imaginative stories for them, much as Miriam had done when they were children.

Something about Neferah disturbed Miriam. The Tzian was a loner, mostly by temperament, and Miriam saw signs of a potential for bitterness in this. She knew if Neferah didn't learn to become close to people, the girl would become haunted by loneliness. She had casual friends as well as men whom she dated, but no one really seemed to touch her deeply . . . except for Jenn. Aside from Jenn, she'd never been willing or able to give her personal trust and affection freely, and Miriam feared Neferah was in for a lonely life.

News arrived that the destroyer Constance would be returning to her orbit above Styx Able IV within a week's time and Jenn bubbled over with joy. Her lovely son Telakin would be coming home on leave. She was so eager to have Miriam meet him, for she was proud of her strong son who had graduated at the top of his class at Neftalak's own Wosomon Academy.

That afternoon after she learned the good news, Jenn became subdued over supper. That same evening, after Neftalak left for his 'navy business' she put Myrnah to bed early and sat down next to Miriam on the sofa to talk.

She looked sad as she began, and Miriam, who'd noticed her odd behavior at supper, was a little worried.

"Miriam, I know that you always know what's going on and that nothing ever gets past you," she began slowly, her blue eyes glistening. "And I know you're aware of what Neftalak's 'navy business' really is."

Miriam nodded, but remained silent. She felt sick in the pit of her stomach when she realized that Jenn, her sweet innocent Jenn who gave her affection freely, knew of Neftalak's terrible betrayal.

"Don't blame him for being weak," Jenn continued. "He draws women like flies, and since he was wounded five years ago, on that mission, he hasn't been the same . . . and I think I'm also at fault because I just can't seem to satisfy him. He looks at me as if I am a little kid. I know I'm childish in a lot of ways, but I can't help it. Please, don't judge him too harshly, Miriam."

Miriam had never heard Jenn speak in this serious manner before. Although she blamed herself for Neftalak's indiscretions, she seemed rational and self-composed.

"My son Telakin knows about his father as well, and once threatened to kill him. I begged him to understand that it's something Neftalak can't control. Now Kin seems to have lost much of his respect for his father. Besides, I love Neftalak very much despite all of this, and I don't want to say or do anything that will hurt him. Please Miriam, try to understand."

Miriam sat still, trying to see Neftalak's side in the matter. She'd known from the moment she'd met him, that he had dormant insecurities and attitude problems. They waited for the catalyst that brought them to the surface. She knew he wasn't a bad person, only that he was weak in many ways and very impressionable.

Attitudes formed in the navy made him hard and as harsh and bold as the other naval officers with whom he worked. Something in that last mission, perhaps the face of the enemy or his close proximity to death, awakened primitive fears in him and brought out this unseemly behavior. The lonely women with whom he consorted were only a symptom of his problem, probably a need to prove his manhood in the face of his hidden fears. Miriam could understand how he would feel unable to confide his innermost fears to anyone else, especially Jenn, for he himself didn't know what they were.

Miriam nodded again, but Jenn wasn't watching her. She had an odd smile as she added, "I have my own sins that I committed out of innocence. When I told Nitel Glass you stole the ginmallows and balue juice, I didn't realize I would cause so much trouble. Nitel told me that I'd set her up, and even then I didn't know what she was talking about.

"You somehow understood and forgave me, but Nitel didn't. Neftalak's innocence is hurting a lot of people, just as mine did back at Ling Wall . . . only now I'm finally beginning to realize what my responsibilities are for my own actions. Please, Miriam try to . . ." Her lovely blue eyes begged Miriam to understand and not judge him too harshly.

Miriam took Jenn's hand and patted it, saying, "I do understand, Jenn, and I won't say or do anything about the

matter. You're my friend and my real concern, and I love you too much to do anything to hurt you."

In her own mind, Miriam still had absolutely no use for Neftalak or his perverse womanizing. Still, there was nothing she could do about it, so she decided to honor Jenn's feelings and keep out of it.

Telakin waited next to the front door when Miriam and Neftalak came home from work. He had arrived ahead of schedule and caught a ride home with a friend.

Smiling broadly, the attractive young man shook hands with his father, then turned to Miriam. "So you are the notorious and wonderful Miriam," he laughed. "And I, dear lady, am Telakin, scourge of little children, plunderer of the icebox, and slave to Jenn the merciless."

Miriam laughed and shook his outstretched hand. "I have a friend on Katolnol Station who'd give a hundred years of her life to be terrorized by you, my dear slave to Jenn the merciless."

With this brief exchange at the front door, everyone went into the living room. Myrnah made straight for Telakin, with whom she immediately fallen in love, and wouldn't leave him alone.

As the evening progressed, and after the supper dishes were dispensed with, Miriam and Telakin put Myrnah and Mupsy to bed. Kin was delighted with his little sister, whom he'd never seen before.

For the first time since Miriam arrived, 11 months earlier, Neftalak did not leave on his 'navy business' and the evening passed smoothly. Miriam enjoyed watching Telakin clowning around with Jenn. At first he addressed her by looking straight forward at the wall above her head; he was half a meter taller than she. Then he stood right next to her, looking straight down on the top of her head while talking to her. Or he walked around on his knees so that he could look her directly in the eyes. Whenever convenient, he put his elbow on top of her head when talking to Miriam. It was obvious that he was Jenn's son, and they absolutely adored each other. Jenn sparkled now as she had with Neftalak, so many years ago. She openly enjoyed all the attention she got from her son and having all of her favorite people together in one place.

During the next few days, another fact became obvious to Miriam. Telakin was infatuated by her, or perhaps more. He spent as much time as possible talking to her about anything and

everything, and wasn't the least intimidated by either her soft Magum eyes or her fine manners. It seemed he liked her just as much as his father disliked her, and in fact, seemed to be drawn to her by the very qualities Neftalak found so distasteful.

Telakin was nothing like Neftalak, and although very young, had a solid feel about him which Miriam found oddly comfortable. He slept on the living-room couch, but Miriam had no doubt that, if given the slightest provocation, he would share his bed with her.

One other aspect of his personality was obvious; he was not a ladies man. Although charming and extremely good-looking, he had a gentle reserve about him that was absent in Neftalak, without making him in any way effeminate. Miriam liked him very much, and made no bones about it, much to the delight of Jenn. As for furthering the relationship, Miriam would wait and see what the future held.

Several days after Telakin came home, Miriam babysat Myrnah while he, Jenn, and Neftalak attended a formal affair at the base's officer's club. Jenn was strikingly beautiful in her form-fitting sapphire dress and small diamond tiara placed on her head; Miriam recognized again just how beautiful Jenn was when her friend came out of her room that evening, dressed for the occasion. Miriam couldn't figure out how Neftalak could be so insensitive with his indiscretions when she obviously had so much to offer. Telakin beamed all over his mother with affectionate pride, and the three left in the best of spirits.

Miriam played with Myrnah until it was bedtime, then, put her and Mupsy to bed. She sang soft songs to the sleepy child until her eyes closed and her breathing became regular and even.

The three returned home early. Jenn had been crying and Telakin looked dourly silent, his eyes oddly sharp and angry. Neftalak was slightly drunk, and as Miriam soon found out, the strong liquor made him rudely obnoxious. He immediately headed for the kitchen bar to make himself a drink. Miriam was surprised by their presence, for she had just come out of the baby's room after checking the sleeping child.

Neftalak came back out of the kitchen, clutching a tumbler full of strong smelling liquor. "What've you been doing in there?" he slurred. "Feeling my little girl up?"

"What?" Miriam asked, not sure whether she'd heard him correctly.

"You heard me, you dirty damned deviate!" he sneered. "You were getting your kicks on my little girl, eh? Don't give me any of your innocent crap! I'm just glad Jenn's not in your damned sisterhood, being made twisted and perverse. I've heard all about your unnatural sexual. . . ."

"Can it!" bellowed Telakin. Then his tone dropped to a deadly quiet. "Or, by God, I'll smash your filthy head in!"

Neftalak instantly sobered, his eyes clearing. "I apologize for my conduct. I've had too much to drink." Then, putting the tumbler down, he made for the bedroom.

Miriam said nothing, but turned and went to her room. Once alone, she phoned for a cab before packing her bag. Then she returned to the living room where Jenn and Telakin sat talking quietly. Miriam stood and watched for a moment, then addressed Jenn in the primary Borg language to get her undivided attention.

"Jenn, I am leaving here tonight, and will not see you again for some time. Say nothing, but understand that I love you and your children very much. I will not, however, be a party to Neftalak's excesses towards you, so please forgive my departure." Then she added, "And remember you this. Despite your husband's unfortunate opinion, you will always be a part of our sisterhood and respected for your own merits."

Jenn looked at her, dull-eyed, the very sound of the softly toned Borg language sobering her. She said nothing as instructed, but nodded with understanding, her small hand giving the secret Nashramh sign: 'farewell until our death'.

Miriam returned to her room without addressing the thunderstruck Telakin, who stood next to the sofa in awe. He had never heard the strange, precise speech spoken before, nor had he realized that his mother spoke more than one language. The softly sophisticated tones of the syllables in the Borg language sent a strong chill down his spine, leaving him speechless. Miriam, he realized, was a strange and powerful personality; one whom Neftalak had been stupid enough to offend.

From this short exchange, Telakin understood two things. He knew next to nothing about the Nashramh Sisterhood, but he knew deep within himself that, despite what his father said, Jenn was a member. Second, he understood that Miriam was leaving.

The cab arrived one hour later, and Miriam moved quietly through the darkened living room toward the front door. As she passed, Telakin, speaking softly, said, "I'm sorry this had to happen, Miriam, but I want you to know you will always be special to me, even if I never see you again. Peace be with you."

"And peace be with you, Telakin B'Mesziah," she replied, and left.

Chapter 13

Attack

No matter how efficient and well developed our long-range intelligence gathering net is, there are still gapping holes in our system . . . and everyone else's. . . .

The first engagement of the invasion was simple and straight forward . . . that is, is if anyone knew exactly what happened. . . .

19:00-08 TALUM 6147-7N5

The Odomak lead destroyer Constance pulled out of her orbital station above Styx Able IV, and headed towards the outer rim for an extended monitoring patrol. Accompanying her were the four fleet destroyers 'Clobite', 'Fisbolt', 'Hendry', and 'Nisben'. All were staffed by seasoned officers, and the battle group was commanded from the Constance by Captain Juger Roydel XI.

Once Roydel verified the course coordinates, his battle group formed into a wedge formation and quickly dropped into the sub-binary for an estimated 13-month voyage.

Sub-Lieutenant Telakin B'Mesziah lounged back in his duty station chair, idly surveying the engineering displays as they rotated across his monitoring screens; all signals were green and everything functioned perfectly. He stared at the mirror gridscreen which displayed the star-studded heavens as the Constance accelerated towards the group's operational zone boundaries. Frowning grimly, he wondered if all the vessels that were being amassed for the expected invasion would be enough; then his attention was caught by the monitors displaying bar graphs of the energizing coils controlling the sub-binary drives as the Constance

dropped out of the temporal plane. The starfields around her took on an almost plasmatic glow, then returned to their brilliant crystalline forms.

He smiled to himself; some men were terrified of the void between the stars, preferring life on planets that housed pockets of human civilization. He was not. To him, the void between the outposts of Creation was magnificent and beautiful, and he felt comfortable spending much of his life in deep space. He'd heard of men who, took on psychotic tendencies from the strain of on their first deep space voyages. These men were usually assigned to ground stations for the duration of their careers.

Telakin felt a sense of fulfillment aboard ship amid the grandeur of the cosmos. He didn't care if he ever saw planetside again, except to visit his mother and little sister. How anyone could fear being out in space was beyond him; but then, not everyone was the same.

Kin's mind wandered back to the day of his departure from home. Although he loved his mother and baby sister very much, he could hardly wait to leave. The strain with his father was just too much, and it muddled his normally clear mind with anxiety and anger.

When Kin left, Neftalak solemnly shook his hand and wished him well before departing for his own duty station on the base. They hadn't talked for the two weeks after the affair with Miriam B'Mesziah, and both knew something had broken between them.

As for Neftalak, he knew he'd burned a bridge with his son over his conduct. He wasn't aware that Telakin knew about his 'navy business' before the night of their confrontation. In this matter, he could easily understand Telakin's anger, but to have the boy defend that strange elf made him bitter. The young man had obviously been taken in by the witch's odd beauty and enchanting manners. She was attractive and intelligent, to say the least, but there was something not quite human behind those calm penetrating eyes that unnerved Neftalak.

With the attack on Miriam, Telakin lost his last shred of respect for his father. He hated the fact that Neftalak could hurt his mother by consorting with other women without trying to hide the affairs. Telakin himself was chaste. He'd never met anyone for he'd cared enough to have a deep and special relationship.

The fact that his father had changed over the years and become a victim of his vices bothered Telakin terribly, and he was determined not to let this happen to himself. He was by no means a prude, but he found promiscuity degrading to all parties involved. Personal relationships were important to him, and to love someone special wasn't something he took lightly, although he understood that in the course of a lifetime, more than one special person could be encountered.

Now, after Neftalak's outburst at Miriam, the first woman Telakin really felt comfortable around, he couldn't conceal his bitterness about his father's behavior. The two had nothing to say to one another from that day onward.

Then there was that talk with his mother . . . his lovely, sweet mother. He smiled, thinking of her. In his childhood he'd never been bored because Jenn loved to play with him, and she never spoke a harsh or reproachful word to him. When he'd been positive something was watching him in the darkness of his bedroom, Jenn said nothing, and simply remembered to leave his door open a crack so a little light shone in.

While Neftalak tried to teach Kin to be brave in the dark, Jenn somehow understood that he wasn't afraid of the dark itself, but there was something there that could be felt, but not seen. Throughout his entire life, all she had to do was ask and he would jump to obey. He loved her dearly, for she was the sweetest person he'd ever known.

It was hard for him to fully grasp just how much he didn't know about Jenn. She hadn't said so, but it was obvious she was a member of the Nashramh. He first suspected this on the night of Miriam's departure because of the strange language she'd used when speaking with his mother. Later, Jenn explained to him that the language he'd overheard was the Borg tongue of Adam Belial, and that she spoke it and two of its sub-tongues, the Tren and Boler languages. She went on to tell him she spoke five other languages reasonably well, and that she was an expert in codes and sub-space communications.

Jenn discussed these matters when they were alone while Neftalak was away on 'navy business'. Apparently he had no idea of her abilities. Jenn had sworn Kin to silence on the matter, saying she knew he would be gone for a long time and wanted him

to know that she was more than a childish little elf. During the talk she mentioned neither Neftalak or of Miriam.

Telakin wondered who Miriam really was. He liked and respected her, although he didn't know exactly why. He'd never been drawn to people, but she was the exception. Deep within himself he knew she was special, and would in some way be a vital part of his future.

Until then, all he had were his memories. And whenever he thought of her during the tedious months ahead, he smiled.

Thirteen months after beginning its sub-binary voyage, the Odomak battle wedge broke into temporal space at the edge of its assigned patrol grid. Abandoning their wedge formation, the five ships positioned themselves in a cyclos formation, with the lead destroyer Constance in the middle of the 100-kilometer radius. The other four vessels had bows pointing outward, and they moved in a clockwise revolution around the Constance. Presently, each ship extended her huge dish antennae from within her hull and began scanning for enemy craft.

The warships remained completely blacked out, running in the night of the outer rim without navigation lights or any exposed reflective surfaces. Only the silent stars lighted the void as the battle group moved unseen through the dark reaches.

Out here they were not alone, and every man and woman aboard each craft knew it. Sudden and violent death lurked out in the darkness, silently biding its time.

The final days in the sub-binary left the crew of each destroyer tense and wary. Everyone knew his or her job, but none knew when or how the enemy would attack. They knew nothing concrete about the enemy's weapons, or if any defense could be made against them. Time was running out and they knew it.

It seemed like suicide to send so few ships into enemy-controlled space when it was known that black cruisers were also patrolling the area. Unfortunately, the G.C.C. combined fleets had little information with respect to the enemy. The faithful populations of the outer rim star systems were welling-up in preparation for their 'liberation' by Sweet Sargon, and G.C.C. Admiralty suspected this meant the black invasion force was on its way. Despite the probability that they would meet certain destruction, small battle groups of destroyers were ordered to the outer rim to contact the enemy and determine his status.

Captain Juger Roydel XI, the last son in a long line of an ancient and distinguished warrior clan, sat rigidly in his command chair aboard the Constance, studying the gridscreen that dominated the destroyer's bridge. Usually his manner was calm and relaxed, for he knew his business and had a clear, focused mind. But now he felt fear. He knew the enemy was near; and fancied he could almost smell them, although he knew this idea was absurd out here in the void. An icy calm descended on the bridge, and his fine-honed mind worked quickly with precision as he scanned the heavens.

Unsure what to expect when his destroyer wedge broke into temporal space, Roydel was relieved to have achieved his surveillance formation. Yet, immediately upon breaking into temporal space, he felt an icy hand of fear clamp down at the base of his neck, and his throat was dry. He felt expected.

All hands were suddenly apprehensive as Roydel leaned over and spoke into his comm-link. He was a tall, striking man of 220 years, and his presence dominated the bridge with calm and self-assurance. Every woman and man on the ship trusted his judgment and fighting prowess and the intense strain of his combat career had already settled on him. His dark hair had greyed at the temples and his shrewd grey eyes were bordered by wrinkles of weariness.

"Comm-group two, transmit our tactical position on sub-band U-two on my command."

Roydel kept his eyes on the gridscreen, searching for something unseen. He focused on a single spot, and more by intuition than physical sight, saw a slight anomaly in the starfield. The ship's long-range search radar showed nothing, but he saw something. Stiffening, Roydel barked, "General Quarters!"

Klaxons blared throughout the Constance, and communications beamed a discrete, pinpoint laser signal to her four accompanying destroyers.

Telakin, sitting at his duty station, bolted to his feet and began tearing off his environmental protection uniform as soon as he heard the general alert klaxons. This done, he made for his battle station, clad only in his grey jumpsuit. If the ship's crew were killed, he would too there could be no chance of his surviving, since his death would detonate the Deadman mechanism.

Swinging inside the tight compartment, he secured the pressure hatch and locked it from inside. Then he quickly seated himself in the control chair and inserted a long red key, which hung on a chain around his neck, into the electro-mechanical backup detonator. Gripping the red spring-loaded handle with his right hand, he removed the lock pin with his left. He jammed the lock pin into the arming assembly slot, releasing the handle to his grip. Again with his left hand, he pressed the comm-link and reported to the bridge.

"Code four-zero. Deadman switch activated! I repeat: code four-zero, deadman switch activated!"

Senior-Lieutenant Minin Arcum quickly rechecked her navigational coordinates for the Constance's aft dish antenna. All settings read accurately, and she held her thumb on the transmitter's emergency activator switch, awaiting the order to transmit their tactical position.

Minin had been in six major combat engagements with the enemy during her 42 years in the Odomak navy, but never knew for sure that 'this one would be it'. There'd been some pretty close calls, in which her survival training kept her alive, but she'd always sensed she had a good chance. Not so this time. Everyone aboard each of the destroyers knew they were on a suicide mission. In this case they intended to give the enemy a run for his money.

As Minin remembered her childhood and early adult life, which centered on memories of winter storms, she mused that space was cold . . . cold and cruel. She didn't want to die out here.

Without warning, Captain Roydel's voice boomed over the comm-link, "Transmit!"

Without hesitation, Minin pressed the activator button and watched as the amplifier gauges registered the sudden load. Then she spoke crisply back into the comm-link. "Transmission one complete. Now on repeat cycle mode, on sub-band U-two."

Now she knew everything would be over soon. As she rechecked the dish antenna, Minim wondered how long it would be before she saw sunlight reflected as prisms on a thick layer of powdery snow.

Leaning forward in his command chair, Roydel barked out station orders. "Gunners, fire at will! Torpedo section three, fire 30

torpedo canisters in a spread of 10 at two degrees off port bow! Weapons, increase shield density to maximum!"

As yet, the enemy wasn't visible. In fact, nothing indicated there was anyone at all out in the void besides the five destroyers. He didn't know how, but Roydel could see an anomaly on his gridscreen that no one else on the bridge could, and he knew intuitively that it was an enemy ship. He would rather be a fool and fire at an imaginary target than blunder into an enemy trap. His instincts had never failed him, and he knew he alone could see them.

"Evasive action now!" he barked to the ship's helmsman, and immediately the Constance changed her heading and moved on a drastically altered course, still dark with no navigational lights. All five destroyers had special markers on their hulls detectable only by systems aboard each designed to see them. Even with all lights out, each nearly invisible ship could be forewarned of an imminent collision.

Fourteen star bursts suddenly appeared on the gridscreen at the very point Roydel had seen the subtle anomaly, then six more torpedo canisters made contact with the cloaked enemy. As these flashes registered, outlines of two huge forms on the bridge's gridscreen and on the screens of the other Odomak destroyers. Both medium-sized battle cruisers were caught unaware by the spread of torpedo canisters.

Ahead and to starboard, the Nisben broke out of the cyclos formation. She made straight for the enemy's lead cruiser, firing four spreads of torpedo canisters directly ahead. Aport of the Constance, both the Hendry and Fisbolt attacked the second cruiser from different angles. A bright blue flash from the Clobite signaled a direct hit from some unknown enemy weapon.

"Get a fix on that," ordered Roydel, as his gunnery control officer squinted into the spectral analyzer's target scope and checked his computer readouts.

"There's nothing, no visible sign of any ordnance being fired. Not a single thing we can register hit the Clobite!"

"Damn!" Roydel mumbled. He wished fervently that he knew what the enemy was using for weapons, but as long as the charge left no telltale radiation or other visible evidence, they were completely in the dark.

Then he faced the helm and weapons console to assess the enemy's screen density as it began to glow in the void. The interior of the bridge went dark as the lighting blinked out and was replaced by emergency red-chem battle lights. The bridge had a smoky glow which brightened as a miniature holographic battle-arena lit up in front of the weapons console. It showed the dead Clobite in dark blue, and the enemy ships with light red outlines and a dark red core.

The Constance fired 18 spreads of 95 torpedo canisters and threw out a ring of 400 thermal mines. The other three destroyers also threw out screens of deadly mines as their commanders saw fit, and continued on their courses to combat the enemy.

Within seconds, the Constance was rocked by shock waves from the Clobite's destruction, and although they weren't strong, Roydel called for situations. The Constance was rocked again as muffled jars from internal explosions sounded from somewhere aft of the bridge. Meanwhile, Roydel kept an eye on the gridscreen which showed both the actual battle and the computer top view of it. He saw the Hendry explode about 30 kilometers from her targeted cruiser.

The darkened Fisbolt shot right through the Hendry's debris, showing visible effects of the shock waves, and rammed the bow of the giant 600-kilometer-long enemy cruiser. At first nothing seemed to happen except for the scattered impact flashes of torpedo canisters. Then there was a brilliant explosion, nothing more.

Roydel, squinting at the screen, saw the Nisben firing her lasers against the enemy's shield screens. It took him a moment to realize what she was doing. The deep green laser flashes were of no use against the enemy's screens since they were dissipated immediately and were rendered harmless. But the Nisben was firing to distract and blind the cruiser to get more time for her ramming attack.

Roydel turned the holographic arena off because it distracted him, and ordered laser fire against the cruiser's screens. Roydel knew the ship's exploding sub-binary drives would effectively disrupt the enemy's shields, creating a hole for him to plunge through and consummate his attack. It was suicide, but there was no alternative.

Suddenly, without warning an explosion rocked the Constance and tore straight through her as if she was jelly, destroying her atmospheric integrity. Sections of her hull were completely gutted of life support gases while others lost pressure more slowly. But she was still alive and in the fight.

The shock waves from the Clobite and the explosion from the enemy weapon had both been intense, but not strong enough to knock Telakin from his position or to loosen his hold on the deadman switch. Shaken, he quickly checked over his straps, then wiped sweat from his brow. Roydel, after pulling himself off the deck several meters from his chair, made his way back to it and restrapped himself in. He called for situations while shaking his head to clear it. His nose was bleeding inside his headgear and he couldn't do anything about it. Hundreds of people were killed outright by the initial explosion, while others near the affected area suffered massive internal injuries. Everyone who'd secured their atmospheric uniforms at general quarters was safe from the immediate effects of contact with the void. Their suits automatically hardened when subjected to the cold of space, and the many sub-layers expanded into a strong flexible armor as premixed and measured condensed gases began filtering inside the suit from built-in canisters.

On the bridge, Roydel clutched at his command chair, bellowing, "What the hell was that! Did it show?"

All around him, people who'd been torn out of their chair straps, struggled to their feet and quickly limped through the dusky-red lighted bridge back to their duty stations.

Those stations able to report in were all in shambles. He soon learned that a number were wiped out completely, including the navigational and communications sections. Yet somehow, by some odd chance, the Constance was still alive: engineering, weapons systems, and intership communications remained intact. The Constance was still on course behind the Nisben although communications between the two ships was of little use.

Engineering reported their status on the barely audible and crackling comm-link. "Bridge, we have major battle damage, but nothing shows on our scanners as to what the hell hit us!"

"Damn," muttered Roydel. How could he beat the enemy if he didn't know what kind of weapons were being used against him.

To Roydel, time seemed to have slowed down, although the entire attack had only taken ten minutes. He'd launched his attack, lost three ships, taken a direct hit and was converging to within 150 kilometers of the enemy in only ten minutes. It seemed like hours and now the enemy cruiser completely dominated the gridscreen. The Nisben was only 80 kilometers ahead of him, her laser banks firing for all they were worth. In a few short minutes he would follow the Nisben into the enemy's shield and try to breach his bow. It was now or never.

"Captain, our drives have just cut out and we're without primary power or control!"

Roydel nodded, looking at the boyish face behind the atmospheric mask. The large lens, which magnified the man's eyes, also reflected the turmoil on the bridge, and in them Roydel saw a console smoking behind him. He straightened.

The gridscreen showed the Nisben as she hurtled directly through the enemy lead cruiser's screens and into its hull. She disappeared into the bowels of the huge black hull as torpedo canisters and thermal mines exploded all around.

Suddenly, in the distance, the bow of the lead enemy cruiser lit up with a blinding flash, and the Constance's viewscreens darkened immediately to compensate for the intense white light. "Great," Roydel mused to himself. All of my important functions go out and the screen shields still work, just great."

The flash lit up the void for a brief moment reaching out and engulfing each of the vessels, then blinked out. Immediately, a second blinding flash dwarfed the first, and Juger Roydel had to look away.

Within seconds, the other cruiser erupted into a series of terrible explosions, the last from its stern section. Time, which slowed down to a snails' crawl for Juger Roydel so that his thinking and observations were crystal clear and calm, had suddenly stopped.

The void became dark again. Nothing remained of the two enemy cruisers or the three Odomak destroyers which had rammed them and set off their deadman mechanisms, which, in turn, shot out shock waves that induced the enemy to release their own deadman mechanisms. The Odomak destroyer, Clobite, was

nothing more than a twisted and gutted wreck, shattered by her own detonated magazines.

A dense cloud of fragmented dust particles, reflecting the light of nearby star systems and showing faint reds and yellows, slowly expanded from the center of the massive explosions.

The lead destroyer Constance, now dead, spun slowly through the void, between the bright fields of stars, much like a lonely sentinel patrolling the outer rim. Ironically, she had not been completely destroyed by the enemy and might have returned home in time. But her crew was frozen solid by high velocity particles of energy, foreign to this galaxy, which shot through her as both of the mortally wounded black cruisers erupted into nothingness. The crew would remain as grotesque statues, just as they'd died. Juger Roydel was still half turned to face the scanning officer, who stared at his monitoring equipment. Even as additional shock waves, delayed by only seconds, rocked the Constance and sent her reeling deeper into the void beyond the sixth arm, the frozen hand of a tall, handsome elfin man held his deadman switch in an eternal grip.

News of the traumatic loss of the Odomak battle group, led by the Constance, did not reach G.C.C. admiralty head-quarters for 11 months. Only one set of transmissions arrived, those initial signals sent by Senior-Lieutenant Minin Arcum at the beginning of the engagement. There were no more.

The absence of further signals indicated a disastrous loss of five vessels, and led admiralty analysts to suspect the Odomak warships ran into a trap or were compromised from within. Detailed checks of all rosters indicated no foreign nationals aboard any of the four fleet destroyers, but that one of the Nashramh people had conveniently been assigned to the Constance one week before her embarkation for the outer rim patrol grid. The Nashramh creature was, interestingly enough, assigned to check the Constance's combat intelligence center's primary computer banks with a team of G.C.C. technicians. This left admiralty analysts with some uneasy questions, and a fresh arousal of old suspicions about the Nashramh.

Sub-Lieutenant Neferah B'Tziah was on section 'B' shift duty watch at Int-Com on Styx Able IV when the G.C.C. received news of the Constance's transmission. After translating and verifying the brief message, nothing more arrived, either on her duty shift or for

weeks afterward. Round-the-clock surveillance immediately focused on the coordinates listed in the transmission. Then after more than 20 hours of silence from all military channels in that far-off rim sector, Int-Com began to suspect it was a dummy transmission, probably from the enemy.

Neferah herself checked and rechecked the coded transmission impulse sequences, and couldn't find anything out of order. The codes were all in the proper code track for the date and time specified. They were perfect in their initial transmission format and preservation. Neferah knew they were not forgeries. If the enemy had indeed sent them, he would need inside information or a plant aboard one of the Odomak vessels.

Neferah leaned comfortably back in her black leather chair, looking more like a defenseless child than an armed Nashramh warrior. She daydreamed much of the time, to relieve her stress and clear her mind. Now, in a musing fashion, she quietly considered this last idea, then, discounted it. With the Odomaks as paranoid and thorough as they were, a spy in their midst was out of the question. Something bothered her, although she couldn't quite catch it. Admiralty analysts seemed eager to believe a spy was present, and she sensed, from an increasing tension and muted hostility towards herself as Nashramh officer, that perhaps the G.C.C. people considered them a threat. Then she discarded this. Even the most arrogant fools in the G.C.C. wouldn't be so stupid as to cut off the only real ally they had, even if the extent of Nashramh affiliations was cloudy to them. But then, they were cloudy to her as well. Still, it was an observation worth considering, and when she next saw Miriam, she would bring it up.

Another woman worked the same duty station as Neferah, and now she looked over at her grimly. She'd always found this little Tzian likeable, and felt able to confide in her.

"Neferah, I think there's something fishy here," she said frowning. "I don't like the implications of this message. It gives us the coordinates of the battle group and their speed and direction of travel, but it doesn't identify the enemy. It must be a dummy!"

Neferah shook her head. "It would seem so, yet this isn't likely. We don't know how the enemy's weapons work, or what his origin is, but we do know how he attacks. He likes to ambush and gang-up, to subvert and divide. We also know he's too bold to send only a single infiltrator aboard an Odomak battle group. Besides, what

is his purpose? To lure us into a sector which we know is not where his main thrust will take place? No, this doesn't seem likely . . ." She shook her head in consternation. "It seems like the signal was transmitted before the enemy was actively engaged, or even seen."

"I don't see how that could be," replied the other woman. "What bothers me is that if an infiltrator had something to do with it, there are probably more, perhaps even here."

This thought was almost too horrible to think about, but it was still a possibility. Suddenly the idea that the Nashramh might somehow be implicated bothered Neferah even more.

Neferah checked the Constance's crew roster and noted that her commander was a Captain Juger Roydel XI. She would have to check with sisterhood intelligence about this one; maybe he or one of his crew had special talents of some kind.

When Miriam came on duty, Neferah briefed her on the situation and her disturbing speculations. Miriam nodded when she heard Roydel mentioned, a strange look coming into her eyes. She knew the background of his line. Maybe he had sensed the enemy before actually engaging with them.

Later, after completing her duty shift, Miriam returned to her quarters and discussed the situation with Council Central.

Although nothing more was heard from the missing warships, a Nashramh deep probe vessel surveyed the area from a distance of 50,000,000 kilometers, and reported to Council Central that there was a great deal of debris in the vicinity. They could not, of course, guess whether enemy vessels were hiding in the radioactive cloud or if the debris was from either friendly or enemy vessels. Council Central ordered the scoutship to leave the area immediately and to avoid any contact with the enemy.

The loss of the Constance and her escorts were interpreted by G.C.C. Fleet Admiralty as being the first phase of Belial's invasion. Any force large enough to silence five destroyers without a trace and without major jamming of radio signals could not be ignored. Battle squadrons from throughout the combined fleets were dispatched towards the outer rim, while larger forces were being readied for a phased departure to their marshalling points further out. Finally, civilian forces were actively at work on chartered spacedock stations, repairing and refitting older ships for use in reserve squadrons.

Where the enemy would concentrate his main thrust and the direction from which he would come, was still unknown to Fleet Admiralty.

Neftalak sat alone on the overstuffed blue sofa, sipping at a strong drink. He was depressed and his haggard face showed it; he had finally come to realize just what he had done to Jenn, his lovely little Jenn, for all of these years. Now to compound his agony, he'd been forced to tell her that their son, their first child together, was missing and presumed dead.

Damn it! He hated himself and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it for either Jenn or Telakin. The baby, well, she would never know her father, except for soft memories, even as Jenn had never known her own father. He was leaving for his ship tonight, and tomorrow, the 'Lisboor' would leave orbit for her combat station.

He had to be aboard the Lisboor in four hours, but he didn't care; he needed this drink. The look on Jenn's face when she heard about Kin, haunted him . . . she looked like a waif who had lost her innocence for the first time. Something had died in her. All life faded from her face, making her suddenly old and tired . . . and Neftalak saw how she would appear when she was old . . . very old. Her eyes became dull and staring as she silently shuffled to Kin's room and shut the door.

That was two hours ago, and he hadn't heard a sound. Now he'd have to tell her that he was also leaving her and the baby.

Neftalak frowned. He didn't really know why he'd treated Jenn badly for so long. Things hadn't been the same since that damned mission. Suddenly it became easy to see things as the seasoned naval officers did, when before he'd been uncomfortable with their worldly views. After his first real encounter with death and no . . . he wouldn't think of that . . . he'd acquired so many damned fixations . . . his need to be around women and a faster pace of living than he'd experienced. He'd come to see Jenn, whom he'd always loved and cherished for her soft beauty and sweetness, as a mere child with whom he could not talk to about reality.

Somehow, deep within, although he had denied it for so many years, he knew Jenn was, and always would be, close to Miriam, that Nashramh woman. Those damned eyes that looked right into him and knew every little thing about him. . . .

Neftalak shook his head. He'd always loved Jenn and hadn't meant to hurt her. He'd always looked at himself as a good person . . . but now he wondered. . . .

Now the die was cast and he could never change the past, and he couldn't change the future. His loathing for himself and all he'd done rose up in his tightened throat like bile, and he sipped at his drink again. Now the liquor no longer helped him; it just made him feel nauseous.

Passing his hand over his eyes, Neftalak set his drink down and rose wearily to his feet. He was still young, not even in his prime, but he felt like a broken old man. Only his hardened spirit and naval discipline held him together at all.

He was afraid to go into the bedroom, to look at her. He was afraid he'd break down and cry.

Unsteadily, he made his way to his bedroom and shrugged on his blue officer's tunic. After preparing his travel bag, he gathered his courage and started for Kin's room.

Neftalak knocked lightly on the door, then, entered the room. Jenn sat on Kin's favorite chair staring vacantly into space, her eyes dull and dry.

Neftalak knelt beside the chair, and not touching her, spoke softly. "I have to leave now, Jenn." Then he said in a whisper, "I have to report to my ship."

He paused; only silence. "Did you hear me, Jenn?"

"Yes," she replied mechanically.

He looked at her, wishing that she would cry, or fight, or do something besides sit there so still and alone.

"I won't be back for a long time. We're moving out to our positions on the outer rim," he continued softly, hating the starkness of his words in the silent room. Then in a rush, he added, "Jenn, I'm sorry for everything. I want you to know that I love you and our little Myrnah. I never stopped loving you."

Standing, he bent down and kissed her on her brow, before turning to leave. At the door he stopped.

"I'm sorry, Jenn."

Then he was gone, first looking into Myrnah's room without entering, then walking slowly through the house and out the front door, feeling old and empty. He would not see his wife and little daughter again.

Jenn sat alone for a long time, staring and numbly thinking about her son who she knew, actually felt, was dead, and about the loneliness of her future. She'd cried and cried until she felt there were no tears left, then cried again. Feeling empty and alone, yet peaceful with a sad calmness, her mind retreated into a soothing nothingness.

Jenn was afraid for Myrnah, her lovely little baby, and she decided that her child would not be caught up in this terrible war. She'd ask the Nashramh to take her to the safety of Ling Wall where she could grow-up knowing about happy things and good people, not this terrible loneliness among strangers.

Chapter 14

Treachery

It's been a accepted fact by politicians over the course of history, that politics and war make strange bedfellows . . . strange ones indeed. This, of course, doesn't preclude treachery and other deadly sins among would-be allies . . . and it doesn't.

10:00-17 SHIKIM 6190-7N5

Sixteen months had come and gone since G.C.C. Admiralty received news of the loss of the ill-fated Odomak lead destroyer, Constance, and her four escort vessels. Since then, the G.C.C. XXVIth fleet had disembarked for forward positions along the outer rim. Now the combined fleets were starting their phased withdrawal to various coordinates throughout the projected invasion zone. Their intelligence analysts and Nashramh allies supplied this information.

There were nearly 18,000 skirmishes between G.C.C. ships and the enemy reported to date, with the Constance and her group listed as the first casualties. More than 30,000 vessels were lost during this preliminary opening of hostilities, and for lack of evidence, these were considered lost to enemy deep probe scouts.

The G.C.C. Admiralty's intelligence analysts had, as yet, no accurate picture of the enemy's posture, nor any reasonable estimates of his losses, if any. A ballpark figure indicated the G.C.C. lost 55 vessels to each of the enemy's. This made it abundantly clear to admiralty analysts, as already accepted by the Nashramh, that the enemy had two major factors in his favor. First, he outgunned G.C.C. vessels with powerful weapon systems

which were completely alien. None of the weapons fire showed on G.C.C. scanners at any wavelength, frequency, or spectrum, and in fact, never appeared to have occurred. Second, he had the element of absolute surprise. No one knew how fast his black ships traveled or from which direction they would come.

This second factor completely baffled the G.C.C. intelligence analysts, although several Nashramh liaison officers suggested the enemy had a revolutionary superior sub-binary drive. The G.C.C. navy's science and technology specialists discounted this theory, which was a known truth to the Nashramh, as being a total violation of the observable laws of nature.

Current opinion among the admiralty analysts and Combined Security was that the enemy already knew the combined fleets' dispositions and their planned movements. This spelled out the nightmare feared by all - the G.C.C. had been infiltrated. Because tension was so high and paranoia rampant, Combined Security felt obliged to single out a likely culprit - the Nashramh. According to the G.C.C. Combined Intelligence Services, the sisterhood's advisers were prime suspects in this case for sound reasons.

First, the Nashramh was a far-flung organization which touched nearly every aspect of both civilian and military activity. In addition, the Nashramh was an ultra secret order with no known headquarters or fleet of their own. Analysts believed that they might be extragalactic in origin, and possibly affiliated with the black ones or enemy allies.

Also it was known, and demonstratively provable, that the sisterhood was entrenched in the Meso-Galactic Trade Monopoly's intragalactic transportation system, which in a way served as their fleet by proxy.

A singular facet of this widespread secret organization which bothered admiralty analysts most was the seemingly dormant power possessed by the sisterhood. If they were in fact infiltrators and spies for the black ones, they had access to all strategic information for the upcoming defense of the outer rim. Even this last-minute suspicion wouldn't avert the implications of the damage they may have caused. More important, if they were involved with, and as suspected, entrenched in the Meso-Galactic Trade Monopoly, they most probably had considerable control over the entire commercial trade system. This meant that if they were indeed affiliated with the enemy, they could interfere with all trade

to every known star system at a moment's notice, which would deal a crippling blow to the entire G.C.C. war effort. Without this giant logistical system totally intact, the war could be lost before it was begun.

With these compelling considerations clearly in mind, the Admiralty began preparations to use military vessels, and to purchase and convert G.C.C. commercial vessels, for trade and logistical support. Unfortunately, this effort was far too little and much too late.

The most damning evidence indicated that the Nashramh women working with the combined fleets were always well-informed in advance of far-off activities, often years before the G.C.C.'s naval authorities received even hints of such information.

That the sisterhood always knew so much before G.C.C. naval intelligence and other information gathering organizations, and with such accuracy, reeked of subterfuge, with more than the possibility of collusion with the enemy. It was suggested in senior policy making circles, that the Nashramh witches were enemy plants and privy to the enemy's strategy and tactics. They took all information from the G.C.C. they could get by subterfuge, and returned nothing.

The case against the Nashramh was slowly built, and plans were made to place the sisterhood on the navy's enemy alien list. Mostly the G.C.C.'s growing concerns about the enemy invasion, and their distrust of the secret order which knew so much, prodded them into action. The members of the secret sisterhood, blended so well into society, and posed an unseen and unheard threat to the leadership of the Admiralty.

There were those real enemy infiltrators, who used these fears to their advantage. Women in the higher echelons of the Nashramh's leadership sensed these dangerous stirrings among their G.C.C. allies, but the tides of war and the pending invasion overruled their priorities on dealing with the problem. This would prove to be a fatal mistake.

* * *

The door slammed open, sending a cold breeze in from the hall outside. Miriam awakened, immediately aware that she wasn't alone, and stiffened. Bright lights shone in her eyes.

"All right, get up, you, and get dressed," commanded a harsh masculine voice.

Completely awake, Miriam gingerly moved out of her bed with all of her movements showing that she meant no harm. Weapons were trained on her. With the same slow, fluid movements, she pulled on her jumpsuit and boots, keeping her hands open and away from her body as much as she could. As she dressed, she unobtrusively scanned the room and doorway for any possible means of escape and found none. There were five men, two by the window, one next to her, and two by the door, each armed, and she could tell that there were more in the hallway. She heard muffled cries and loud thumps as she dressed.

As soon as she finished dressing, Miriam was commanded to stand at attention. Her captors scanned with a portable GH-metal detector and determined her to be free of weapons.

They pushed Miriam roughly into the BOQ hallway and marched her out of the sprawling multilevel building with her hands clasped up behind her neck. Standing along the halls at close intervals were heavily armed naval officers, their eyes and faces set in determination. Now she realized that the muffled noises she'd heard were other sisters who'd resisted and been brutally punished.

Once outside, Miriam's captors herded her together with a dozen other women she knew to be Nashramh sisters. All stood with their hands clasped behind their necks, while at intervals a harsh voice instructed silence.

Armed men and women stood everywhere, with their deadly laser rifles trained on the sisters. Several prisoners, two of them Sister-Novices who were fresh out of the academy, looked shocked and disorientated. All stood still with a single question forming on their lips: how could their own allies, their own people, turn on them like this?

At the edge of the group, Miriam noticed two corpses of sisters whom she surmised were thought to be resisting and shot. One she knew was Sister-Novice Quil Borr, a flighty girl who had yet to learn to hold up under pressure. Both were naked, their bodies strewn in death as if they were rag dolls. Miriam felt sick to her stomach along with anger and pity at the sight.

Several women in the group had been roughed-up, and Miriam saw a couple of broken noses. All stood shivering in the biting

midwinter air; here the temperature dropped below freezing, and most of the women wore only night clothes.

Once the BOQ was cleared of all Nashramh sisters, the group marched to closed trucks for transport, although their destination wasn't disclosed. The prisoners, including one with broken ribs, were pushed roughly into the back of the first large truck, and the two corpses were shoved in with them.

Once the doors slammed shut and were bolted, the truck began to move. At this time, to the surprise of three male guards who sat next to the door with lasers trained on the prisoners, a heavy woman in a rumpled captain's uniform bent over each corpse and closed the eyes, then appeared to kiss each of them. Miriam was relieved to see that someone was equipped with an oral gamma-crystal; it helped a lot in a rough situation like this.

The tightly packed truck lurched along, and the prisoners did their best to help their wounded and to keep from being hurt themselves.

The truck finally bumped to a stop after what seemed like hours. Miriam heard the front doors creak open and numerous feet shuffle, before the back doors were flung open. After the three guards jumped out onto the ground, heavily armed troops faced the women with bright spotlights focused into the truck.

A woman's voice commanded, "All out! Stand with your hands behind your neck or you will be shot!"

Everybody got out and did what they were told. As one of the women clambered out, she tripped on her night-gown, and a hard-eyed guard yanked her up by her long black hair. She stumbled in surprise, her eyes wide with fear, and he backhanded her and shoved her in line with the others.

Miriam took note of her surroundings before they were commanded to march at attention with their hands in position. They were now in a darkened hangar, and 100 meters away, just outside the building, stood a squat G.C.C. naval cargo vessel some eight kilometers long. They were all marched to the ship's main freight loading elevator, and every meter of the way, armed navy men and women covered them with their weapons. No chances for resistance or escape were possible, and it was now plain that the women were prisoners of war, an undeclared war at that.

In front of the elevator, Miriam saw another group of imprisoned women waiting to board. Miriam and her group were marched up behind the first group of some 16 women.

Miriam heard sounds behind her, and unobtrusively turned her head a little to see where they were coming from. Another group of 14 women were being marched through the corridors leading from the hangar, and since she was in the back of hers, she saw what happened.

Foremost in the oncoming group, a young girl of no more than 25 years was roughly pushed along by one of the guards, and when she stumbled, she unclasped her hands to catch herself. The guard, seeing that her hands weren't in place, callously shot her with her laser pistol. The guard was a woman from the G.C.C. navy. The other prisoners were forced to step over her body, and the guards at the back of the group loaded it onto a cart which carried three others. Miriam felt bitter and helpless. The women around her had shocked and bewildered looks on their faces.

Once the prisoners crowded into the ship's cargo elevator, the cart with the four bodies was wheeled aboard. Then, with a whirr of machinery, the elevator slowly lifted up into the ship's hull.

The trip up took several minutes, but with so many tightly packed bodies, some wounded and some dead, the air began to get thick. One woman with a weak constitution fainted, but before the guards noticed, several sisters kept her from falling for the rest of the trip up. With their hands clasped behind their necks, they supported her with their own bodies.

When the elevator reached number five cargo bay, the prisoners marched off in a single-file line between armed troops through a small hatch with a beefy soldier posted at the guard station beside it. Miriam took careful note of the arrangement of the station, which was meant for five or six men, and considered how it could best be overcome. Then the guards roughly pushed her inside the compartment, now filled with other sisters who'd arrived earlier. The corpses were brought in last.

There were 46 dead in all, and the heavy captain with the gamma-crystal checked each one carefully. When she completed her task and turned away, her sad eyes met Miriam's and she raised her left hand and touched her mouth twice with her thumb, indicating that she'd gotten them all.

Within minutes, several more dazed prisoners entered through the hatch, which slammed shut behind them. Sounds of an arc welder penetrated the metal hatch which was being sealed. They were trapped.

Miriam had a vivid, constricting memory of her last hours on Lublinog before being burned alive so long ago; this terrible situation seemed too much the same. Except their enemy now wasn't the rabid faithful of Sweet Sargon's love, but their own allies who'd turned against them!

Miriam looked around the crowded compartment, which turned out to be one of five spaces. She saw women of every age milling about in a state of confusion and disorientation. Then she saw a gathering which seemed to be calm and collected. She slowly made her way to it, and introduced herself. One of the women was Neferah, who'd been working at her duty station during the roundup and had come in with an earlier group.

The small gathering of officers initiated some semblance of order by placing the 46 corpses in the walk-in freezer. They held a quiet prayer service for the dead, and an insignificant-looking woman who seemed to blend into the walls led the oral affirmation to the Eternal's Compassionate Justice:

"Hear, O'Daughters of Compassionate Justice, The Eternal Our Creator, The Eternal Is One!"

Once they sealed the locker, the now organized kernel of leadership turned to the next order of business.

A headcount indicated there were 308 sisters confined to four large rooms. Ninety had wounds ranging from a dislocated knee to broken ribs and noses. One woman had a badly smashed cheekbone. The site of the injury was badly discolored and swollen, causing her eye to swell shut. She had already entered the beginning stages of shock.

Neferah quietly spoke to Miriam in the Nashramh's secret language. "One of these rooms has three water closets. In the far one, our benefactors have a jury-rigged food lock through which food and water can be passed at any time. There's no running water." Already, before Miriam's group arrived, several women managed to bypass one of the stool's waterlines for drinking water, but it was a small pipe with limited capacity.

The wounded were gathered in one room where several women donated articles of clothing for the medics. They carefully bound

the broken ribs, and supported the noses with packed stuffing. "The girl with the smashed cheek has a fractured jaw and a serious concussion," Neferah pointed out. "We need medical supplies or she'll suffer irreparable brain damage, and possibly die."

The women were now being broken into groups of ten, with an officer to lead them if possible. They were already planning their next move which was to wrestle the ship from their captors. The officers took every precaution to ensure secrecy, and to disguise their true capabilities by appearing to be both disorganized and frightened. Long years of hard experience and special instruction under adverse conditions made this nothing more than an advanced training exercise. To the outside observer they were only a moaning mob of dispirited women. Herein they succeeded, Miriam noted with satisfaction.

Miriam listened to Neferah with a sense of admiration. The little cat-girl had certainly grown up since they were children, and she'd become tough and resourceful. It was obvious the Nashramh combat training courses she'd excelled in, had added to her fighting character and organizational abilities. Neferah was military-oriented, speaking and moving with the precision and conduct of an experienced combat officer. At this, Miriam smiled to herself. Neferah, like many Tzians, was certainly a strong asset to the Nashramh. She wouldn't want the girl to be her enemy.

"All five rooms are monitored both visually and with audio-links. There are two small closets in each room, but only one has a door. Other than that, we're completely exposed to surveillance by our captors," Neferah wryly noted to Miriam. "We're trapped in an interstellar cattle car awaiting termination." There was no question in her mind that every one of them was destined for the execution chamber. This was no game, and only cool planning and a determined fight would get them out of here alive.

Within minutes after they'd sealed the walk-in freezer following the funeral, a voice rang out from the audio-link.

"All prisoners will lie down on the deck. We're about to lift off."

Several preliminary vibrations followed before the impulse drives came into full operation. The women barely had time to take their positions on the deck before the vessel lifted off and swiftly cleared the atmosphere of Styx Able IV. Several minutes later, she dropped into the sub-binary and the vibrations stopped.

After about an hour in the sub-binary, the audio-link came to life.

"This is Captain Lider Adeno, commanding officer of the G.C.C. Naval Support Vessel, 'Oskinben', speaking. The rules for this voyage are simple. All prisoners will remain in cargo bay five and make no attempts to escape. In the event of any, and I repeat, any attempt at escape is made, or anything that looks like an attempt, the compartment will be flooded with nitrogen gas and all oxygen removed."

After a short pause he continued. "Cargo bay five is hereby designated exempt from this vessel's premises, and all Nashramh prisoners are considered hostile aliens who do not fall under the rules for naval warfare. All prisoners officially fall into the category of spies and saboteurs." Again he paused. "Food and potable liquid will be passed into the cargo bay once every 30 hours. The prisoners may divide it at will. That is all."

Thinking quickly, Miriam addressed the audio-link nearest her. "Captain, we have 90 wounded women here. May we have medical supplies to work with?"

The captain's voice resolutely answered, "No. Prisoners will receive only food and water rations as stated."

Miriam continued addressing the audio-link, trying to establish a dialogue with their captors, and another man's voice responded to her questions and requests, all to the negative. Still she continued, keeping her voice calm and reasonable.

Finally she turned the thankless task over to another sister who persisted with the requests. Now she and the others knew how things stood between them and their captors. The G.C.C. Admiralty had changed the rules, and it looked as though they were in for a tough time. She estimated by the timetable for the food supply that they would be in their cozy little prison for quite awhile.

The heavy woman with a dislocated knee lay on the deck moaning, and Neferah bent down to help her.

The woman's guttural moans formed words in the Nashramh battle language, and she moaned to Neferah: "Cat girl, listen to me carefully. I have a fiber laser in my belt next to the buckle. Fool around like you're trying to help me, and get it out. When you have it, go over to that corner closet and work with the black-skinned girl. She's an engineer who can get in and out of anything."

Neferah did as she was instructed, and retrieved the deadly weapon. The woman continued to moan and sob, and other women also sobbed quietly to themselves, a few out of real pain, and the others who knew the battle plan and their need to preserve the illusion of feminine weakness. Some hugged their arms around themselves and rocked dejectedly back and forth, and the Captain on the bridge glanced at them disgustedly from time to time.

Neferah eased her way over to the black girl, talking to women on the way and comforting them. When they finally met, the dark girl winked conspiratorially at her. Then strolling slowly together, they comforted other women, and made their way to the closet with the door and squeezed their way in, closing the door behind them. Neither spoke.

Carefully, the black girl cut a half-meter diameter hole in the deck with the fiber laser. The two squeezed through, dropping lightly onto the cargo containers in the bay below. It took only minutes to pick their way to the deck, where they moved quietly and quickly to free their companions.

In the meantime, many of the women in the main rooms above continued moaning to keep the guard's attention away from the closet while others with great self-discipline fell asleep or pretended to sleep listlessly. A very heavy woman, on a signal, began to whine and cry, stumbling towards the water closets. She didn't quite make it, and vomited all over the place, splattering everyone in her way. A few of the women, who were tired and confused, were unable to keep their own gorges from rising as well; the guards watched this disgusting display of weakness and depravity with scorn over the visual-link. Some of the women frantically tried to get out of her path, while others just rocked and moaned to themselves. Miriam, after she'd made her rounds, settled herself and pretended to sleep well out of the woman's path. The deception worked and the two girls cut their way out of the closet unnoticed.

The guards were ordered to keep an eye on these treacherous witches, and to flood the compartment with nitrogen gas if they tried anything. How these whining and pitiful creatures could be considered dangerous was a mystery to them, but they remained prepared all the same.

Neferah and her companion, Irin Nemir, moved quickly along the bulkhead leading to a ladder 15 meters ahead. Suddenly, two

men in maintenance clothing appeared, and Neferah cut both down before they knew what happened. Irin moved quickly to the bodies and removed their weapons and maintenance key-cards.

"We're in luck," Irin signaled by a hand movement to Neferah. The two climbed the access ladder to the deck above. Irin used the captured maintenance key to open the hatch.

Once they were in number five cargo bay, they stopped to get their bearings, and then moved toward the guard post next to the welded hatch of the makeshift prison.

Eight guards stood outside the hatch, one at the monitoring console. The gas activator switch was clearly visible near his right hand. All carried both sidearms and laser rifles.

Silently, the two girls positioned themselves four meters apart, and lying flat on the deck, maneuvered their way closer to the guards using deck machinery for cover.

The motionless girls, on Neferah's signal, took careful aim and opened fire into the group with their weapons. Neferah killed the monitor control guard first, then, proceeded to fire at each guard at a time. Five of the soldiers were cut down before they knew they were being attacked. One lunged for the gas switch on the console, but Neferah shot his legs out from under him before he got there. The other two spun around and were dispatched before they could react and return fire. Within seconds the fight was over, with seven dead and one dying.

The girls immediately moved over to the guard's bodies and disarmed them without a word. Then they cut a small hole in the bulkhead next to the sealed door.

The prisoners made directly for the hole and filed silently out, removing their wounded with them. They spread out into preorganized battle groups, 16 armed with one weapon. Four groups were assigned to disrupt the ship's operating systems and create diversions, while the main groups systematically captured the Oskinben. Eighteen able bodied women were assigned to protect the 90 wounded from enemy retaliation while the vessel was under siege. No warnings were given, nor any quarter offered; either there was immediate surrender or death.

The G.C.C. crew and security force were caught by surprise. Those who could fight back stood their ground and did their best to defend themselves. In this respect they were no match for the combat trained Nashramh women who took advantage of every

tactical opportunity and used every form of cover to fire from. Once the lights went out, the women had the advantage. They were well versed in fighting inside closed spaces, and in the dark, using point isosceles targeting techniques with their pistols and similar methods with their captured rifles. Those who were unarmed threw chunks of metal and anything else they could find to cause diversions and confuse the G.C.C. defenders. No one spoke as each woman did her part, and within 20 minutes the game was over, leaving only some mopping up to do. Each group armed its members with weapons taken from the enemy's dead.

Captain Lider Adeno was absorbed in his navigational log when the port-side door to the bridge slid silently open. There was a muffled scream as the helmsman spun to the deck, his shoulder ripped open and burning. Neferah breezed through the door and made straight for Adeno; this one she wanted alive. All he saw was a lithe young girl who pounced at him, her black eyes flashing. The officer next to him drew his pistol, and with practiced reflexes, she burned his head off.

Before Adeno could react and reach for his own side-arm, he was faced by the vulnerable-looking girl with cat eyes who leveled a deadly laser pistol straight at his face. He paled.

"You make one move and I'll burn your ugly head off. Do you understand me, Lider baby?" she hissed softly.

Miriam arrived on the bridge moments after its capture, and made directly for the navigator's console. The navigator lay nearby, his head torn open and smoke rising from the burning effects of the laser. She quickly scanned the navigation settings and found the destination clearly indicated.

Closing her eyes slightly, and appearing to be in some sort of prayer, Miriam stood still for several minutes on the quiet bridge. Neferah, who now had Captain Adeno spread-eagled against the aft bulkhead, noticed the elf and her strange posture, which revived old memories from her childhood. She didn't know what Miriam did while in that strange trance, but it fascinated her all the same.

Moments later, Miriam talked to another high-ranking sister and related her instructions from Council Central in the Nashramh battle language.

"Get us into temporal space as soon as you can, and we'll dismantle this ship completely. We want everything of either

military or intelligence value removed. One of our vessels will pick us up as soon as I can give them our coordinates."

She paused, then, spoke to the members on the bridge speaking in battle language. "We were headed to Colber Titus Prison World, which Council Central informs me is to be attacked by our own forces. All of our sisters, who are there, will be liberated." She looked directly at Adeno. "It's a safe bet that the wardens there are going to use torture and mind bending drugs on us to learn what they think we know, and kill all who're bold enough to resist." She felt sick as she said this. Their 'allies' did these horrible things to their captured enemies? They were not far from resembling the black ones if they did. "Apparently they have already begun prisoner processing." This message was passed on to the sisters throughout the ship.

Adeno gaped. He didn't know what Miriam was saying, but he did hear the name Colber Titus. How in hell could they know about Colber Titus? That was a top secret military base masquerading as a prison world, and known only to a select few. How could the Nashramh have a source of information there, since all communications equipment was far underground and heavily guarded, unknown to either the prisoners or the lower-ranking personnel.

Adeno now began to understand just how dangerous the sisterhood really was.

Miriam added, "The roundup of our people is taking place everywhere, and the order to evacuate all Nashramh personnel exposed to G.C.C. capture has been given."

She next turned her attention to the captain, speaking in galactic common. "Well now, Adeno." she said. "What was that crap about changing the rules of naval warfare in the case of hostile alien prisoners?"

"It's Captain Adeno," he replied, trying to keep what was left of his dignity in the face of those intimidating eyes. They had taken his ship, damn them. His ship!

"No, my dear Adeno," she replied softly, her strange eyes emotionless. "If any one of my sisters dies aboard this junk heap you call a ship, you will be 'Corpse' Adeno. We will hang you by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead! Like any other common criminal or traitor."

Adeno paled, his brown eyes flinching, and he assumed a rather grey-green color. Those damned eyes bothered the hell out of him, as did that death sentence. "I've only followed orders," he answered softly, his voice shaking.

"That we know," responded Miriam. "And we know who the Admiralty trash is that brought those orders into effect. Know you this, my dear Adeno," she smiled grimly. "They are all dead men. We mean to hunt every last one down and execute each without mercy. You and your scummy kind are about to learn a terrible lesson. When you treacherously break a treaty of trust with the Nashramh there is no escape from our retribution - not even in the grave. And it will be bloody." Her voice took on a soft, almost caressing drawl.

Within eight hours, the Oskinben broke into temporal space, and Miriam checked the coordinates against the navigator's star charts and passed them on to Council Central. Meanwhile, the sisterhood wounded received medical attention after the fight was over, since many had taken part in the assault as well. It looked as if all, including the girl with the smashed cheek and jaw, would make it.

Of the 854 members of the ship's complement, 35 remained alive, and only three were unwounded. The wounded got medical attention, and were placed in an open cargo bay under guard. Ten of the prisoners were women, and after a count of the dead, it turned out that 30 percent of the crew was female.

All the prisoners were in a state of shock, since no one had any idea that the Nashramh prisoners were capable of taking over their vessel. They had no experience with seasoned soldiers, and it was a fair guess that many didn't know they were even aboard. Most were foolish enough to fight, firing salvos of laser bolts at the attacking women; none were able to hit the well-trained, rolling bodies, while the sisters never wasted a shot and hit their targets with deadly accuracy.

Later debriefing of the surviving crew made this training abundantly clear to Admiralty Intelligence, and the threat to execute their guilty leaders wasn't to be ignored. They began to suspect they'd made a fatal mistake, and weren't sure what to do about it.

The Nashramh deep probe command destroyer, 'SD Claren Demorah Zee', pulled slowly alongside the crippled Oskinben, and

extended grappling gear. The Sisterhood's wounded and dead immediately transferred to the Scout Destroyer, while the remaining women, who weren't guarding prisoners, went aboard next.

During the wait for the Claren Demorah, the women gutted the Oskinben of all computer and security data. They dismantled each of her vital operating systems, beginning with her drive units, communications gear, and navigational record crystals. Even the vessel's viewscreens were destroyed, blinding the remaining crew from seeing outside. All spacesuits were punctured and torn, leaving the survivors helpless prisoners in their own ship.

Miriam addressed the captain. "We're leaving you with an all-channels emergency beacon mounted outside your vessel. Hopefully someone will notice it and come to your rescue. If not, then tough luck."

Captain Lider Adeno stood rigidly at attention. His face was unsmiling, grey and tired. "This is a military vessel, and there are rules for dealing with captured military vessels and their crews," he insisted.

"Yes," Miriam replied with a little smile. "But you must remember, Adeno, it was you and your criminal henchmen who changed the rules of war on us."

Miriam stepped to the door where Neferah stood poised with a laser rifle leveled at Adeno. "You may have your ship back, Adeno, but remember that you've started something far more dangerous to you and your kind than facing the black ones. You've turned against your only real allies in this part of our galaxy. Without us, you can't win much less defend yourselves against enemy infiltration, subversion, and conquest. Think on that, Adeno."

With this, the two women, the last Nashramh sisters aboard the Oskinben, closed the door behind them and made for the ship's airlock.

The Claren Demorah eased slowly away from the now derelict Oskinben, which was nearly still in the darkness of the void. Her airlock was jammed open and only the flashing beacon on the externally mounted radio transmitter could be seen receding into the distance.

Chapter 15

Adato

Not everyone in our sisterhood sees military operations in the same light, and all too often voice their reservations. . . .

11:50-21 SHIKIM 6190-7N5

The Claren Demorah dropped into the sub-binary after setting her helm for RAD Station IV-2134, some 500,000 years distant.

Once aboard the destroyer, Miriam was escorted to the ship's bridge by a squat-looking creature only remotely biped, whose race and type were totally unfamiliar to her. The woman was dumpy with dark grey skin, oddly flat yellow eyes, and a wide mouth. "In there, Sister Miriam," grunted the creature, which then turned away and waddled off for other quarters.

Stepping through the open hatch, Miriam entered a wide bridge crammed with both people and equipment. The hot air was muggy, and the dim light filtered and glowed through it, leaving the area misty - the myriads of stars visible giant gridscreen, seen as from a misty swamp.

Sister-Captain Adato Salin, who sat hunched up in an oversized command chair, motioned Miriam to join her. The elf picked her way through the mass of bodies to meet the captain.

Adato looked at her and croaked from deep within, "We're a bit crowded today. We aren't equipped for so many passengers, so I've moved most of my off-duty personnel onto the bridge until we can make other arrangements."

"There's always time for a little closeness," Miriam said with wry a smile. She was tired, but didn't show it visibly. "You get to know your neighbors in a hurry."

Captain Salin surveyed her guest with an appraising stare that seemed to be judging the quality of something to eat. She saw a woman of no more than a hundred who looked much older; it was a combination of her hawkish face, unfitting for such delicate elves, and her soft Magum eyes.

Miriam returned the look; Adato was from a race she'd never encountered before. She had dull-looking eyes, long black hair that looked greasy, and an odd swarthy green complexion. Random long dark hairs grew out of her face, especially from what looked like warts, and her mouth was possessed of large, droopy, moisture-laden lips.

"So, we have a second Magum aboard, eh?" she croaked. "You'll meet our 'Hulican' when he's done whatever it is he does around here." She paused again, measuring Miriam. What she said next caught the elf off-guard.

"By the way, did you people have to kill so many of those poor slobs on the Oskinben?"

Miriam hadn't expected to hear such a thing, and she looked intently at this odd sister whose manners, if that was what they were, bordered on casual disrespect.

"We did what was necessary, given the situation," she replied. "When are we due to arrive at the RAD station?"

"Oh, in about seven months," Adato answered, "but so many of those poor slobs . . . what a waste."

She paused, then added, "You can billet with Hulican. He won't mind, I'm sure."

Miriam nodded. After realizing that Adato had nothing more to say, she left the bridge and made rounds of the Claren Demorah. She met with various senior sisters to see if they and their charges could adapt to the crowded conditions on the small ship. After several hours, dead tired, she returned to the bridge. There she met Hulican, a tall, slim man with pale skin and a hawk-like nose protruding from an almost transparent face. Upon closer examination, she realized his body was lean and bony, and that he wore an odd style of boots which appeared much too heavy, nearly causing him to drag his feet. He was the first living Seraphim Miriam had ever met. The heavy boots were to keep him from

floating off the deck due to his light density. His eyes were dark, almost black as the void, and softly deep, indicating a Magum personality, and his hair, like his eyebrows, was pure white.

"It's good to finally meet you, Miriam B'Mesziah," he smiled, his voice melodic. "Please come to my, or better, our cabin, so we may become better acquainted."

His words seemed to flow like lyrics to a song, and his voice struck a deeply nostalgic note in Miriam's mind.

Somebody within her was getting excited and she wondered who it was. Then she guessed that it was her two Seraphim sisters, Tengi and Telenji.

The two squeezed through the vessel's claustrophobic corridors which were alive with people, and presently Hulican said, "Please, in here. It's not much, but its home."

The cabin had the same ethereal look to it as Hulican himself. It's furniture was in soft pastel colors, and had numerous musical instruments and pretty crystal objects sat about. It appeared Hulican was a musician, and Miriam learned that his entertainments of songs and music helped keep the Claren Demorah a happy ship.

Hulican sat down on his bunk while Miriam sat at his desk next to the bulkhead. She saw volumes of galactic literature and histories lined neatly on several long shelves above the desk. At one side of the desk, a computer and visual-link tied into the ship's main system.

Hulican appraised Miriam with his deep, knowing eyes, and he sensed that at least one part of Miriam's Magum personality was Seraphim like himself. With a sunny smile, he said, "Well, my dear. What do you think of our jolly captain and her merry crew?"

"I don't really know how to take them," Miriam confessed. "Unfortunately they're outside my experience, and seem a bit casual in their ways. Although Sister Salin is, I know, a highly qualified warship captain, I don't really understand her rationale as yet."

Hulican leaned forward, his elbows on his knees; if not for his black eyes, he'd be an albino. "Sister Adato Salin is a study in contradictions. She's casual and most often insulting in her speech and attitude. From all appearances, one might get the impression that she's unkempt and crude. But in truth she's just the opposite. These mannerisms are indigenous to her race and culture. She's

one tough and cunning captain, and has been in more scraps than I care to enumerate."

He took a deep breath, and continued in his hypnotically melodic voice. "She lies awake at night and worries about the casualties on both sides. She detests the idea of hurting or killing anyone, especially if it can be avoided. She's from a race of swamp dwellers that eat mosses and water plants; they're gentle and intelligent by nature. Their world of origin no longer exists for them since the black ones poisoned its waters and atmosphere. The millions of her kind who escaped are devoted members of both our Nashramh and the Ansharim, and they fight only because they have to . . . because they want to stop the black ones from doing to others what was done to them."

Miriam nodded. "I understand, but I must deal with Adato personally to really get to know her. Thank you for setting me straight before I formed any unjust opinions."

The two agreed to take alternate work shifts at the ship's communications center and with Council Central. Hulican suggested that Miriam should get a few hours sleep. "I'll awaken you near the end of my shift and show you around." With this, he left her alone to sleep, and she drifted off immediately. It had been a long and crowded day for Miriam and signaled the end of her days of peace.

Nothing was visible on the large gridscreen as the Claren Demorah moved through the darkness of space. About 900,000,000 kilometers distant shone a dull red sun, which was a dying red giant three times the standard size, generating little light and heat at this stage of its evolution.

The Claren Demorah had broken into temporal space 30 minutes earlier, and was on her approach pattern for the RAD station. Small instruments on the captain's console and the dim echo from the helmsman's radar screen, were the only indications there was something else out in the emptiness besides the compact vessel. Miriam was on the bridge, strapped into an auxiliary chair acting as a guest observer.

Slowly, the dim image of a large lifeless moon began to grow on the gridscreen, barely visible as its darkened surface absorbed the faint light emitted by the distant sun. This was the Rim Area Defense Station, a dark, obscure moon circling an equally dim

planet 15,000,000 kilometers to the port stern of the Claren Demorah.

During the voyage, Miriam learned a great deal about the sisterhood she'd never before heard or even suspected. Hulican was, as she'd guessed, from the Seraphim, as were Tengi and Telenji, two members of her own Magum complex. She was really surprised to learn that he was the male personality of a female-dominated Magum. He was the first she'd met. At first she thought Hulican must be from the Ansharim Brotherhood, but he explained, "You will meet Ansharim Magums, both male and female, at the RAD station. There you'll learn a great deal you've never suspected could exist. The Magums from the brotherhood are composed of one female intellect bonded with nine male personalities; they are, in a way, reciprocals of our Nashramh Magums."

Miriam was fascinated by Hulican's status as a Magum. She'd simply never given thought to the possibility that her own male component, Raphael, could be the outer face of her complex personality. The idea of being born as a man never occurred to her.

He smiled humorously. "Well, Miriam, one doesn't really feel much different whether in a female or a male body. By this, I mean my Magum personality works well either way. But then, of course, I am affected by certain drives and needs. Thus, if I'm in a female body, one of my female components acts as our outer face, while I control the male factor. This doesn't in any way affect our combined temperament, nor is there confusion about whether to follow male or female tendencies. You'll experience this in time."

Hulican went on to prepare Miriam for surprises she'd encounter on the RAD station, which included the many varieties of peoples stationed there.

Captain Salin also proved a fascinating source of information. She had a habit of barging in on Miriam at any hour, even if it meant waking her from a sound sleep, and talking about all sorts of things. Miriam was intrigued by the woman's stores of knowledge and range of experience, and also by her command of the Borg language.

"So, those bastards had you at Borgdragon Fortress, eh?" she announced. "I can see why your eyes are so sad . . . but don't be bitter about it, for there are too many good things to offset it." Miriam smiled; this sounded like Vargo or Rinim speaking.

"How did you know I was at Borgdragon?" Miriam asked warily, searching Adato's dull eyes.

"Hulican told me, and as you know, he knows everything. Second, your manners suggest an association with the black ones in their own environment. I have, in the past, been an observer of their activities, and you display amazing similarities to certain of their mannerisms."

Adato went on to inform her about enemy activities out on the rim, and gave her a wealth of valuable information about tactics to use against Adam Belial's forces, both on planetary and in spatial arenas. But she never discussed her own world or its terrible fate with Miriam.

Adato turned out to be a complex binary-five personality, one male and four female. Her core personality was from her present race, as was her first binary; the others came from worlds like her own. Although she was a warship captain, she loathed the idea of harming living beings, and she took on the responsibilities only because there was no reasonable alternative to fighting the black invaders.

She was tough, and had an amazing capacity for battle tactics and strategies, in both spatial and planetary settings. Adato had also spent several centuries receiving intensive training on the enemy from Council Central, and this made her a wealth of information.

Miriam came to appreciate this strange sister and to cherish their many conversations. Adato benefited as well. From Miriam's firsthand account, she learned aspects of the black ones she hadn't known before.

The Claren Demorah's crew was a mixture of the conventional personalities Miriam knew, and oddly alien types like the Captain's. The ship was well-organized and efficiently run, with a very compatible, if not happy crew. Despite intense overcrowding and overworked life-support systems, everyone fared well and dined on a variety of vegetables and fruits throughout the voyage. Lectures, entertainments, and military training sessions took place among the cramped passengers, and the voyage progressed without stress or real discomfort.

Miriam and Neferah spent a great deal of time together as well. Neferah billeted with five other officers, switching off shifts so each could use the bunk for part of each day. She took an instant liking

to Adato, and often talked with her and Miriam, trying to learn all she could about the enemy. She hoped to someday become a warship captain, so Adato accommodated her, assigning her regular bridge watches.

Neferah also spent a lot of time with Hulican, whom she once remarked to Miriam was like a, "pale bird". He taught her about his musical instruments and she came to like him as much as she did Miriam.

During this time, Miriam grew to respect the little Tzian even more. The way she'd taken charge during the capture of the Oskinben was admirable, and Miriam knew Neferah was slated for high rank in the future. Neferah wasn't only a tough soldier, but she had a head on her shoulders and never underestimated her opponent. She also had one other quality that most professional soldiers Miriam knew did not; she was in every way compassionate and a diplomat when necessary.

Miriam sat still and watched the impressive and breathtaking descent to the RAD Station below. The 753-meter-long Claren Demorah dove straight down towards the dark moon without checking her speed, and Miriam saw for an instant a portion of the mother planet, a giant dull, misty orange-grey world which loomed behind the vessel. She caught her breath, as the ship continued to dive toward the rapidly growing moon at an alarming speed until she was sure they would crash into its surface.

Miriam looked over at Captain Salin, who sat comfortably in her oversized command chair munching on some nuts as her vessel continued down on its collision course. Suddenly, they were inside the moon, gradually slowing in a 600,000 kilometers-long by 12 kilometers-diameter darkened tunnel, bored straight through the center of the moon. Miriam later learned that this was one of 50 such tunnels penetrating the large, super dense moon. Now she was fascinated as she watched the gridscreen display some of their surroundings.

As the Claren Demorah eased to a halt within a few seconds of her entry into the yawning tunnel, giant hatch doors opened next to her. Grappling gear attached itself to her hull, pulling her out of the tunnel and into a huge mooring bay.

Awed, Miriam watched as the mammoth bay doors closed again, sealing the bay from the tunnel. Dim lighting grew, and a thin atmosphere pumped in, restoring external pressure. She

gasped; the mooring bay was immense, big enough to hold 10 or 12 vessels the size of the Claren Demorah. Miriam suddenly had a fleeting memory of her adventures in a similar bay on the G.C.C. Freeworld many centuries in the past.

The cramped passengers immediately disembarked to debriefing centers and then to comfortable lodgings. Miriam and Hulican were among the last to leave the rapidly emptying, and somehow lonely vessel, while the captain and crew remained aboard to straighten-up.

Smiling happily, Hulican led the way down numerous brightly lit white corridors. They were lined with hatches leading to other areas, turnoffs, and to elevators, stairwells, and ladders leading to different levels. Miriam was surprised that they were never challenged by any of the myriad of security guards stationed everywhere, and when she looked at Hulican with the question, he laughed.

"This is a different kind of facility from any you've ever seen before, Miriam. There are no foreign elements; only the Nashramh and a few Ansharim are stationed here. Council Central for this zone, is in constant contact with each Magum, so there's no need to challenge us. We have the green light."

Miriam nodded already looking around at everything she could see. How Jenn would love to explore a place like this!

She was impressed by the apparent immensity of the RAD station. It had a comfortable feeling about it, and she liked it as soon as she set foot inside. The very atmosphere had a strong, friendly feeling, and all the people she saw, even if they were busy, seemed happy. Obviously, people here were allies, and Miriam remembered a similar sense of homecoming when visiting to Three-Stones Academy for the first time.

After several minutes, the two reached a personnel elevator, which Hulican directed to stop at level 7051. Miriam saw that he'd been here many times before, and was familiar with the station. As they walked, he nodded to people they passed and chatted happily about the station's features.

Once out of the elevator, which was so smooth a ride that Miriam hadn't realized it had stopped. They checked into the closest garage and obtained a passenger car. Hulican drove the vehicle into a tubeway and set the autodrive with coordinates for their destination. He didn't tell Miriam where they were going right

away, but chatted about various aspects of the station, such as its facilities and recreational equipment which were open to all. Then he sat back and was silent for a moment.

Sighing, he continued. "We're going to Magum Administration first to get our apartment assignments. After that, we can get our briefing and duty schedules." Then, smiling, "frankly, I'm a little tired of the ship's fare and would like a decent supper, like to join me?"

"You bet," Miriam responded happily. "That's the first decent thing you've said to me since I met you," she smiled, musing to herself that Adato and her merry crew were rubbing off on her.

Hulican laughed softly and sat back, relaxing. The trip took nearly half an hour, and the vehicle passed through numerous lighted tubeways, reminding Miriam of one of the mammoth starliners. She wondered if the Sisters of Orb were assigned to RAD stations, but as she was about to ask Hulican, they arrived at Magum Administration.

Miriam was impressed. Magum Administration was a suite of offices bordering a large park area, again much like those of the Starliner-Supremes. Raising her eyebrows, she mentioned this to Hulican, who laughed and replied, "My dear child, who do you think designed all of those starliners anyway? The entire Trade Monopoly is owned and operated by the Nashramh, and is, by the way, a major source of our income."

Miriam's eyes widened, startled. No wonder the Nashramh had so many convenient hiding places and secret ways to travel! And that was why they knew how to bypass the starliner's computers - or, was it how to use them?

She shook her head in wonder that she'd never considered, or even suspected the Trade Monopoly and the Nashramh were one and the same. It sure explained a lot.

"Thanks for the revelation," she laughed back to Hulican. "Boy, I'm in for some surprises! I wonder what they'll be."

After parking their vehicle, Miriam and Hulican checked into the administration office where each was handed a briefcase with their new apartment numbers printed on them. The clerk, a furry-looking woman, winked merrily at Hulican and beamed.

"Great to see you back, kiddo. Now be good to your little friend."

The matronly creature winked at Miriam and added, "There's a special signal for you in your briefcase, Miriam. Let me know what your course of action will be after your briefing session."

The woman radiated a sense of motherly warmth towards them, and Miriam couldn't help smiling. Then she thanked her, bowing, and turned to leave with Hulican.

"Who was that?" she asked, mystified.

"That my dear, is Sister Buja Afshar, who was my mother some time back. She and I are closer now than we were then, and she keeps me on the straight and narrow." He laughed, pleased that he'd seen her again. She'd always been a strong influence on him, and it was she who had introduced him to one of his female parts. He laughed again.

"If you think she's a character now, just wait awhile. You've seen nothing yet!"

Miriam's apartment was similar to other Magum lodgings she'd stayed in, except it was larger and more elaborately furnished. She spent a few minutes becoming acquainted with her new home, then cleaned up and prepared for her briefing session, only 30 minutes away. She found her bathroom was lavished with all sorts of modern fixtures, including a large tub with therapeutic devices. She smiled again, remembering when she had such a tub during her life with amputated legs. Ah, those times had been good, one of the best times she could remember. All her friends were with her and she'd had a wonderful future to look forward to.

What would happen now? The war was approaching, and in the busy days to come, this might be her last moment of true calm. Oh, yes, good things would happen, but she knew the war would soon engulf all of them, soldier and civilian alike.

Just before leaving her comfortable new home, Miriam opened her briefcase. Inside were five information booklets, a map of the immediate area, an order form for new clothing, and a sealed envelope. Chuckling to herself, she looked over the information booklets and map, knowing she'd need them. The variety of places and things to do in the huge station astounded her. It was like an immense city complex, with everything from shopping centers to business areas and zoos.

A little apprehensive, Miriam opened the sealed envelope with a paper knife. She found a single slip of paper inside.

Sis-Nov Jennanine B'Mesziah arriving 08 TALUM 6191-7N5
on scout destroyer SD Nardo Oboor-Vee. Please advise me -- do
you wish this sister to be assigned to you as adjutant?

Buja Afshar - TMT-0060B
26 NASHIM 6191-7N5

Miriam had an immediate compulsion to phone and to confirm the assignment, but she caught herself. Buja had said to inform her after the briefing. Jenn was coming! She would see her little friend again!

Miriam met Hulican on the way to the briefing, and they entered the small theater and found seats next to each other. Neferah entered a few moments later and sat next to Miriam, humming a happy tune she'd made up aboard the Claren Demorah. Hulican helped her construct a reed instrument which played up to three octaves, and with certain reed combinations, made harmonies. Since then, she'd learned to play quite well and never parted with her beloved syrinx, which she kept tucked in a convenient pocket of her uniform.

The briefing was an appraisal of G.C.C. naval operations against the enemy. Miriam and Hulican, being Magums, were both well-informed on the subject, but Neferah was not.

Several intelligence officers conducted the briefing, but their commanding officer struck Miriam as someone she should have remembered. The tall woman was of a race unfamiliar to her, and reminded her almost of a carrot. She had tannish-orange skin, snapping black eyes, and was completely bald, but Miriam knew right away she was a senior officer who took no crap from anyone. She just wished she knew why the woman seemed so familiar.

Of the six people giving the briefing, two were Ansharim men. All were working together in various fields and had combined the details of their lectures just recently for presentation. Events and atrocities were escalating out on the rim, and both organizations pooled their resources to combat the coming invasion.

The first stirrings of enemy action already encountered by the G.C.C. forces, the briefing indicated, were merely enemy probing actions and deceptions, before the major thrust. Both the Nashramh and Ansharim planned to send deep space probe ships as far out as 150 light years beyond the farthest reaches of the rim to serve as an early warning system for the G.C.C. Admiralty. For

now, no information was being transmitted to G.C.C. navy analysts, since a state of hostilities now existed between them and the Nashramh.

It wasn't merely a matter of ego that the Nashramh didn't transmit intelligence information. The G.C.C. people didn't trust it as accurate and discounted it. No matter how dire the G.C.C. attempt to wipe them out had been, this state of prewar hostilities with the black invaders was simply not the time to play petty games. There was too much at stake, and without Nashramh help, the G.C.C. couldn't hope to survive the war, even as the Nashramh couldn't hope to survive long without the G.C.C.

Until the G.C.C. Admiralty accepted the Nashramh as true allies, they would never accept the information. And, during this period of hostility, infiltrators in the Admiralty might learn of the Nashramh early warning system.

Sister-Captain Kourunah, the 'carrot' in Miriam's eyes, emphasized, "We don't expect the state of hostilities with the G.C.C. to last much longer. It will probably be another few months at the most, since they've encountered a number of harsh realities where it really hurts."

She pointed out statistics displayed on a mirror-screen as she spoke. "First, we carried out our promise. Our vessels attacked and destroyed 600 facilities and 900 G.C.C. support vessels carrying Nashramh prisoners. All of our living sisters were liberated and the bodies and Gamma-B's of the dead have been retrieved, with no losses. The number of ours killed by their captors were 3,465 alone, and several were Sisters-Magum. Now, more than before, we have no Magums to spare, and all will be assigned to active duty."

Turning to face her audience, she added, "Second, in retaliation for the G.C.C.'s hostile acts against us, we have taken our promised retribution. Not only were the prison facilities and support cargo vessels destroyed with heavy losses to both ground personnel and ship crews, but we have also initiated a series of more than 2,000 executions of the leaders of the plan. These were mostly all high-ranking government officials, military and naval intelligence analysts, and the fleet admirals who were responsible for the actions against us. This retribution has forced the G.C.C. Governments to pay an unexpectedly high price for their treachery."

Miriam nodded in agreement. The only way to get their attention was to hit them at the very top, where the real decisions were made.

Kourunah continued. "Third, G.C.C. naval squadrons are, because of their obvious inferiority in weapons systems, sub-binary drives, and long-range detection capabilities, nearly powerless to combat the enemy's probes. The G.C.C. is losing 800 ships to every one of the enemy's. This is mainly because all their early warning information, via us, has dried up, and their own communications are far too slow."

The lighted 10- by 15-meter screen behind her, displayed statistics about G.C.C. naval losses, including size and description of vessels, numbers of personnel aboard, and detailed lists of otherwise unknown factors.

"We estimate that the G.C.C. has lost 500,000 combat vessels. In most cases it's obvious this happened because they didn't know the enemy was coming their way. Thus, the enemy's element of surprise has depleted the G.C.C. frontline fleet's operational strength to a dangerously low level."

As Miriam listened to the endless statistics and read them on the screen, she shook her head to herself. It was a stupid tragedy that those millions of brave young men and women were being slaughtered because some bigoted asses decided to play suicidal games at the last moment and turned the G.C.C. against their only true allies. As it was, the G.C.C. would have plenty of trouble repelling the invasion, even if all went well. They were, in comparison to the enemy, mere savages who, on the field of battle, were throwing spears and their naked bodies at airplanes and tanks armed with lasers.

The briefing went on to discuss all present Nashramh, and Ansharim, actions. For this part of the briefing, one of the other women and an Ansharim man stepped forward and presented their information.

"At present, the Nashramh is bringing all fighting ships capable of deep probe action into service. We are also in the process of recruiting all Magums, whether small children or dying old women, into active duty so that all deep probe scouts can have instant communications. We expect to lose the bulk of our ships in this action if things go wrong, but we must, I repeat, we must be in a position to aid our G.C.C. allies when they come to their senses

and accept our help. With their vast increase of losses, and the three factors previously mentioned, they should be suing us for peace in short order. Not only do they have the problems we've already mentioned, but they have another one closer to home. Populations of a large number of worlds, who are affiliated with us, have become restless with the inaction of our forces. The actions of the G.C.C. against us, has caused a great deal of internal strife, which has been growing stronger as the casualties among their own fleets increases. So, we must be ready and able to give G.C.C. Admiralty all the support we are capable of without reservation."

The briefing continued on for another five hours, listing specific details of Nashramh and Ansharim battle plans. Both made extensive use of the screen to detail such plans as the cloaking devices for the deep probe scouts and the details of the Robel Drive. Not only were sisterhood vessels being sent out far beyond the rim as early warning scouts, but the Ansharim was also adding more than 500,000 warships and their male Magums into the effort. The plug had been pulled, and both organizations were placing the bulk of their fleets into the dangerous and extensive action. If the Ansharim had any doubts about the maturity of the Nashramh, 100,000 years after that fateful confrontation between Miriam and Arden Ardel, didn't show it.

Among the plans discussed, were those for after the battles were over, if they survived them intact. Not only would there be deep probe scout ships participating in the mainline of resistance before and during the invasion, but there would be mortuary vessels sent to retrieve the dead afterwards. The mortuary vessels would comb the entire void where actions had taken place and search for Gamma-B's of the intragalactic forces and their extragalactic foes. This effort alone would probably take several thousand years to accomplish.

Miriam wondered about the Ansharim who appeared to be putting everything up front to aid the sisterhood in their quadrant of the galaxy. There was so much about them, and her sisterhood, that she didn't know, even though she was a Magum. It seemed that Council Central wanted her to learn everything for herself instead of telling her. Because of this, she had no idea just how much there was to learn. And indeed, there seemed so little time to learn it.

Now the conscious memories of 'Miriam', her long sleeping personality from ancient days, flooded her with images of this almost mythical brotherhood with whom she had worked and failed. Now she'd move among them again in a new effort to redeem both herself and her sisterhood.

Neferah too, learned much more from this briefing than the facts presented. She realized for the first time that Miriam was a Sister-Magum and that she and all other Magums possessed some secret means of instant communications between themselves and Council Central. She was awed by the prospect of this discovery.

After the briefing, Miriam and Hulican went to the administration office to pick-up their assignments. Hulican asked for Neferah to be his adjutant, and received a verification of her assignment.

Miriam considered her assignment carefully. She'd been assigned to the deep probe scout, 'SD Whisper-Lal', which would be stationed where it was suspected the enemy might emerge from the sub-binary in force. The Whisper was a lightly armed, sleek vessel which didn't stand a chance in a frontal attack even with an enemy fighter.

After thinking the situation over, Miriam turned to Buja. "Was there any mention of a child accompanying Sister Novice Jennanine B'Mesziah?"

Buja checked her register. "The little girl, Myrnah, was accepted at Ling Wall Academy for Girls. Sister-Novice Jennanine B'Mesziah is traveling here with one of our military contingents."

"Then please assign her to me as my adjutant, and have her billeted in my apartment. I have an extra bedroom," agreed Miriam with a smile. So, Myrnah was to have the best! And it would be the best, especially if Heline or someone like her managed to stay at Ling Wall during the invasion.

"And Buja," she smiled, "thank you for letting me know that she's coming." Yes, she was happy to be seeing Jenn again . . . it would make things much easier to bear. . . .

Buja winked and said, "Let Hulican suggest where you have supper tonight. He isn't good for anything but his singing and his taste for food, and he's slightly above average in both."

She then turned to another Magum, one whom Miriam later met, who arrived for his appointment.

Chapter 16

R.A.D.

Preparation for the inevitable can be both hectic and pleasant . . . especially when you're among friends. . . .

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Miriam answered her front door in response to the chiming bell. She opened it with a ready smile, only to be confronted by two burly men standing close together.

The larger of the two, who had a short sandy beard, announced, "My Grace, we have a young lady to deliver into your custody. Her name is Sister-Novice Jennanine B'Mesziah." The man next to him, with dark brown hair and eyes, shifted position so Miriam could see a nervous and pale Jenn behind them.

The bearded man continued without a smile. "Do you accept custody?"

"Yes, thank you," replied Miriam with a nod.

"Thank you, my Grace," he answered, stepping out of the way and allowing Jenn to pass. She was completely dwarfed by the two men, both of whom were over two meters tall. Both bowed and left without further comment.

Jenn floated through the door, her eyes big as saucers, and Miriam gave her a hug. "You felt like a prison inmate, hey? Well, you're safe now Jenn. They're gone."

Jenn nodded as she excitedly scanned Miriam's beautiful apartment and leaned over to smell a colorful budding plant. "My god, Miriam!" she exclaimed when she rose again and caught her breath. The men seemed so big and burly that she'd been afraid to

breathe, although they, like most other Ansharim brothers, were very gentle people.

"Where are we now?" she breathed, looking around in wonder. "I didn't know if they were going to eat me for dinner, or what!"

Miriam laughed gaily. "Dear Jenn, you must realize that all gold doesn't glitter. Appearances are deceiving, and you must learn to discern this. After all, what seems fair is often foul. Even the loveliest garden with colorful and fragrant flowers can entrap you with poison hidden behind its beauty."

Jenn stiffened from the flower she was sniffing. Glancing at Miriam's smile, she broke into happy laughter. "Oh! You. . . ."

"Still," she added, "those men looked like they wouldn't know a joke if they ran straight into one!"

Miriam laughed again. "If you think they were bad, wait until you meet the Sisters of the Gate at one of the Academies. One must pass them to enter, and I swear - they look as though they could eat you alive!" She fondly remembered when she'd first arrived at Three-Stones Academy and had met the dragon-like creatures with row upon row of jagged teeth. They'd discuss fresh meat recipes while thawing a sister out of cryo-freeze.

Jenn babbled on happily, both relieved and still pent-up from nervous tension, as she strolled around Miriam's living room and explored everything, including the neat desk video equipment. "They didn't even say a word to me, but just glowered at me and drooled, my word!"

Just what Jenn's word was Miriam never knew, but she laughed. "I think they like pretty little girls. And Jenn, you haven't seen anything yet. You're going to love this place; the park outside is just like those on Starliners-Supreme I told you about. And guess what? There's a real live Mnemex here too, how about a drink?"

Jenn nodded, and after a short while began to calm down. Miriam showed her around her new home where the two would stay for a month before their scoutship, the SD Whisper, left for extended patrol.

After showing Jenn around and arranging a modest wardrobe for her, Miriam paused. "I have another surprise for you, my friend. I've arranged for us to have breakfast at one of the cafes, where Neferah will join us. Then we will visit the zoo with the Mnemex."

Jenn brightened for a moment, then her face clouded. "I uh . . . I don't know, Miriam. Neferah didn't come to see me hardly at all when we were at Styx Able IV together. I don't think she likes me anymore."

Miriam took Jenn's hands and sat down next to her. "Now Jenn, that's simply not true. I know you're Neferah's best friend and her fondest companion. Oh I know she spent a great deal of time with me as a child, but you're her favorite person, to whom I come second. It was you who made her feel at home, and it was you who made her feel good being a little girl when I was trying to force the two of you to grow up faster."

Here, Miriam smiled. "I have a feeling that Neferah wanted to see you more than anyone when you were on Styx Able IV. But you see, she knew about Neftalak's 'navy business' and simply couldn't bear being around it. Whereas I forced myself to abide by your decision, she couldn't. With an understanding of herself that few people have, she knew she'd say or do something concerning Neftalak that would hurt you. She despised him for his weakness, and couldn't forgive him as easily as you did." Miriam's eyes took on an odd glow, almost like Neferah's.

"It's customary among such women as Neferah, who know themselves and who give themselves completely to their chosen mate, to take bloody retribution for betrayal. She was restrained from confronting Neftalak because of orders from a senior sister."

Miriam patted Jenn's hands gently. "With her pointed dislike for him, Neferah feared she might kill him anyway, or say something that would drive you from her forever. So, isn't it better to be parted from someone you love for a short time than to create a situation which might destroy your close feelings for each other?"

Jenn nodded, looking at Miriam with a new admiration; Miriam still seemed to know everything, especially about people. But still, she wished that if this was why Neferah had avoided her, she could have told her herself. Well, maybe tomorrow would be like old times again!

Miriam frowned a little, then spoke again softly. "Jenn, enjoy your stay here as much as you can. We have a lot of work to do on updated enemy codes before we leave. Once you understand your assignment you'll need whatever pleasure you can get before it's too late." She offered a brief account of current events and of what was expected from them on their mission. "If we have to die out

here, as I suspect we will, then I want you with me and not alone among strangers. Death out in the void is a terrifying and lonely prospect."

Miriam poured another drink as the subject turned to Jenn's decision to apply for combat duty. Jenn sadly recounted the events following the confrontation between Neftalak and Miriam, and how something had broken between him and Telakin. Then she'd learned of her lovely son's death out here on the rim, and now Neftalak was also assigned out here. She knew that she had to do something for the Nashramh and to protect her little Myrnah from a terrible life of loneliness among strangers. "I asked the sisters at Ling Wall to care for my baby and help her grow to be a good person." There had been happiness at Ling Wall for Jenn, and she wanted Myrnah to have some little piece of it before everything went to hell in a bushel basket.

Jenn sighed, thinking of her darling little baby who'd gazed at her with her big blue eyes when she'd turned her over to the representative sister from Ling Wall. Myrnah hadn't cried, or even looked reproachful, if babies ever could, but somehow seemed to understand her mother had to leave. Jenn found some comfort for her actions in Myrnah's sad, yet understanding, eyes.

Now that Jenn was here, she'd try to do whatever was asked of her, no matter how dangerous or frightening. Her life was empty now that Telakin was dead and Myrnah was somewhere else. She knew she'd never see Neftalak again, and she needed to be a part of what was going on, not just an observer.

The two talked long into the night, and finally retired hours later.

Smiling and stifling a yawn, Miriam entered Jenn's bedroom to waken her. The little elf was still fast asleep, bringing back memories of their childhood together. Jenn still had the same sweet, vulnerable appearance as when she was young, and Miriam marveled that she had changed so little in all of these years.

Moving to Jenn's bedside, Miriam rolled her out of bed. "Rise and shine! We have great and wondrous things to do today," she sang out, thinking of Rinim.

The two joined Neferah for breakfast, and although a little reserved at first, both Jenn and Neferah warmed up to each other and were soon chatting about old times. No mention was made

that Neferah avoided Jenn and her family on Styx Able IV, or about Neftalak.

Later, as she walked away from the table on her way to another training seminar, Neferah realized just how innocent Jenn was. Just as Neftalak's injuries to Jenn had poisoned Neferah's attitudes toward male elves for many centuries to come, it would also take a long time for Jenn to understand what happened and why. While Neferah knew she hadn't been around very long, so couldn't remember much, she, at least, had some knowledge of the hard facts of life. Jenn was to ignore them.

The three finished breakfast before Neferah left for her seminar, and among other things, chatted about the status of events on the rim and their possible roles in future hostilities. Neferah verified her assignment as Hulican's adjutant, and was looking forward to the venture.

Sipping hot chenoline, she said, "He's a strange creature, that one. He seems so gentle and reserved, but I sense he can take black retribution on his enemies."

Miriam nodded; Neferah already knew something about Sisters-Magum. "What you see is a man whose personality is tempered by the influence of nine females, and since all work together they combine to make Hulican's unique and complex personality. Perhaps you've wondered why he insists on giving advice and background information even when you don't need it."

Neferah nodded. Hulican had the habit of advising her on anything he could, and while she was grateful for the special treatment, she often wondered why he did so when so many other people were content to let her make mistakes, or left information out when they gave instructions.

"A long time ago, when he was very young, he made a serious mistake. Now, mistakes are nothing new to the Nashramh, as you will unfortunately have to learn in time, but he still hasn't forgiven himself, and it's from this mistake that many of his habits stem."

Gesturing with her hand, Miriam briefly explained how a Magum was put together. Then she concluded, "Quite a while ago, over 80,000 years past, he, or she - for this component of his personality, a Tzian named Nestriah, found herself in command of a Nashramh warship. This was her first command position, for she was only a Sister-Novice. During an emergency, the Captain and other bridge officers were killed in action. Although she was very

smart and tough in her own way, Nestriah was only a first generation off-worlder and a single personality from the light-skinned, branch of the Leven Adah. Due to inexperience, she made a wrong decision which cost the lives of a group of Ansharim pathfinders."

Neferah leaned forward, her steaming cup of chenoline all but forgotten as she became absorbed in the story. Miriam noticed the intense glow in her eyes and nodded.

"Yes, that's why he feels an affinity for you; one of his first components is a member of your own world of origin, Tziah. But unlike you, who've had the benefit of training all your life, plus a few other exceptional qualities, she had no real guidelines to work on."

Neferah felt herself start to blush; she wasn't used to complements, especially from someone as high up as Miriam.

"She needed guidance and experience before being thrust into a command position."

Miriam's own eyes took on an odd glow, and Jenn, who till now had sat silently sipping her tea, perked up.

"Her commanding officer at the time was Sister-Captain Vargo Noyen, an old friend of mine, although Hulican told me this tale. Anyway, Vargo and her ship, the 'SD Hoanna Joy-Zee', was assigned to take control of and destroy an enemy base out on the rim, and in the skirmish, Vargo and her bridge officers were killed. Nestriah and her comrades aboard the ship rescued their bodies, and then made for a much smaller version of our RAD station."

Pausing for a moment, Miriam continued. "What happened next wasn't really Nestriah's fault, although as the ship's commander, it was her sole responsibility and she still considers it so. On the way back to the RAD station, the Hoanna Joy came across a derelict Ansharim vessel with three survivors and 20 dead aboard. They were brought aboard the Hoanna Joy and the derelict destroyed when the log crystals and other equipment had been stripped out. Nestriah's first mistake was to take this action without the permission of Council Central, although there were no Sisters-Magum aboard. Instead, the three remaining survivors were treated for their injuries, then, locked in the ship's brig. Being inexperienced and not knowing the make of the derelict vessel, she was unwilling to believe the three and their comrades were allies as they claimed; she'd never heard of the Ansharim before. Later,

when the Hoanna Joy was damaged and her fuel supply dissipated and life support systems damaged, Nestriah chose to get rid of excess baggage, including the bodies of the dead Ansharim men."

Shaking her head, Miriam sipped at her tea. "This is where it gets tricky. Apparently another member of the crew found a crystal with which to capture Gamma-B's, and retrieved those of their dead sisters. But, she neglected to tell Nestriah, who had no knowledge that such a thing existed. Thus, 20 Ansharim bodies were thrown out with the rest of the debris, complete with their Gamma-B's."

"What happened then?" asked Jenn, her mouth hanging open.

"To make a long story short, three years later the Hoanna Joy limped into the RAD station, her impulse fuel nearly gone and sub-binaries already dead from the initial battle. Nestriah was met by a Sister-Magum, who asked her to turn over the three Ansharim prisoners and the bodies of the other 20. Of course Nestriah, not knowing the identity of the men, had disposed of their bodies. Communications were restricted when the Hoanna Joy's main dish antenna was damaged, along with the two sub-binary drive units. She soon learned that one of the men she disposed of was a Brother-Magum, and the rest members of a pathfinder team."

Miriam paused for effect, and Neferah nodded, under-standing. "And because of the withheld information about the gamma-matrix crystals, she didn't know to retrieve the Gamma-B's before ejecting the bodies."

Neferah nodded as Miriam continued.

"It took a long time for her to understand exactly what was done under her command. The Nashramh didn't hold her solely responsible because of the extreme circumstances which dictated her actions, nor did they blame the woman with the crystal who'd truly believed the men were black ones. It was Nestriah who never forgave herself for her own actions. She decided to make it an intrinsic part of her personality to help any and all young officers learn the pitfalls of command responsibilities before they found themselves unprepared for a similar situation."

She leaned back and stretched. "So now my dear, you know a little something of your 'pale bird', hey?"

Neferah nodded, fascinated. The tale explained so much, and she felt she could now understand Hulican a little better.

This story disturbed Neferah and she wondered if she, too, would be forced to face a decision beyond her experience to judge and act properly. Would she also fail her sisterhood out of ignorance or innocence?

Suddenly, she realized that to be as innocent and carefree as Jenn seemed desirable indeed.

After Neferah left, Jenn and Miriam finished a last cup of tea before deciding to leave. Jenn groaned, "I haven't eaten this much since I don't know when. I think I'm going to burst open."

Jenn's words were light, but her pixy face was unsmiling, and Miriam glanced sharply at her. Jenn never ate much when something was wrong, and now that she was separated from her family, she was on the fringe of depression. She'd paled and had become thin as a wraith.

Miriam smiled and gave Jenn a light punch on the shoulder. "Well, I hope you're not too full for shopping and visiting the zoo and aquarium. Here we have things you've never seen, nor even imagined!"

Jenn perked up, thinking about the promised Mnemex and other strange and exotic creatures. Maybe they'd see some of the funny-looking people Miriam told her about. Until now, the cafe was fairly empty and all she'd seen were several Odomak types and a few other humanoids.

Miriam's promise was good. Jenn couldn't remember when she'd had such fun. The day's activities reminded her of summer camp, parties, traveling and marriage put together. First they strolled through extensive shopping malls, which Jenn soon learned were for more than just shopping. Not only were a great variety of products and crafts imported for RAD personnel, but there were also various theaters, music and lecture halls, sidewalk sales, impromptu performances and jam sessions, and so many kinds of food and beverages to sample that they made Jenn's head spin. The malls extended for more than five square kilometers, like others on each of the countless levels. Miriam chatted easily as she guided Jenn around with the practiced ease of a well-seasoned traveler.

Jenn was amazed by the varieties of things to be had, and even more by the many types of people. She'd never imagined there were so many species around. While on first glance many looked strange and completely alien, she soon realized most were of the same

basic humanoid structure, with only superficial differences. Most of these people were completely outside of her experience. Little did Jenn realize, despite Miriam's attitude of congeniality and friendliness that her older friend had as limited experience with them as she did.

After several hours in the mall, Miriam took Jenn for a short tour of the aquarium and zoo. "Most of the creatures aren't here just for our enjoyment and entertainment, but for their own protection. Most are from worlds that have in one way or another been threatened by the black ones, and the only way they can survive is often in strange atmospheric conditions that few worlds have. A great many varieties have been seeded on other worlds which are suited to them, but usually these are fairly harmless creatures and no threat to races already there. Many of the creatures here are of the more dangerous kinds that will destroy other life forms they encounter. Since they can't be transplanted, they're kept here and are well cared for."

Jenn was wide-eyed with wonder as Miriam guided her to a large window which overlooked a hewn rock valley with various kinds of trees and other plant life inside. The environment was dusky, so Jenn had to wait for her eyes to adjust before she could see any details. Then she gasped.

Inside the valley, dominating an entire corner was the largest reptilian creature she'd ever seen. The space itself was several hundred meters square, and near the opposite corner was a large, deep pool of what looked like water.

"My god, Miriam, you mean they can create the whole climate and atmosphere for them? Wow!"

Just then the gigantic creature moved its massive head, and the dim lights reflected dully on its many-faceted eyes. "Wow!" Jenn whispered again, in awe.

Miriam dragged her on to other areas. "This is really a limited wildlife refuge. We've also arranged several worlds without native populations as major wildlife reserves, so if one day you get stranded on a strange world and meet a Mnemex or something else like it, you're probably on one of the seven NWR stations. Now. . . ."

"You mean whole worlds belong to these creatures?" Jenn asked, incredulous.

Miriam laughed at the awed look on her face. "Yes. I don't know much about the venture, but it's taken thousands of years to

mature. Sometimes a world is in its primordial stages and can react favorably to seeding of wild plant life and animal populations. In other cases, a world which seems dead, so to speak, can have its orbit shifted to a favorable position for eventual seeding. In any case, on the rim of the sixth-arm there are seven such worlds, three consisting of vast oceans of both salt and fresh water, and four consisting mainly of wide continents with varying temperatures and climates. I don't know much more than this, so if you want to learn more, I'm sure that the combo-libraries have something on them."

The two went on, observing various kinds of water life forms, such as large whales that had a hidden source of energy which alternately allowed them to blend with their surroundings, and to take on a glow that blinded their enemies. And much to her delight, Jenn got to see her first real live Mnemex, which was a towering creature of some eight meters with six short, thick legs, that specialized in eating smaller animals, and, on the world from which it came, the native humans as well. This one was scaly, indigo in color, and had a habit of slavering and slobbering, at every opportunity, out of its long, dragon-like snout. On its world of origin, it was referred to, by terrified natives, as the 'Great Worm'.

Jenn's wonderful day was over all too soon, but when she tumbled into bed that night, worn out, she thought about all the neat things she'd seen that day. As soon as her head touched the pillow, she was fast asleep.

The following month was filled with activity and little time for pleasure other than a quiet conversation over tea before retiring to bed. Jenn spent most of her 18-hour days studying the latest cyphers from both the G.C.C. fleets and the enemy. Her command of sophisticated code groups astounded the senior communications officer, since Jenn could easily recognize subtle cypher sequence shifts that often escaped computer analysis. This ability led many to respect the funny little elf, who otherwise seemed to be only a child among adults.

During her own 18-hour days, Miriam worked closely with the Whisper's crew, who were refitting the vessel and testing the newly installed comm-system and high-gain dish antenna. She worked with Sister-Lieutenant Cromel Dinost, who specialized in navigation and communications equipment, and who was an

experienced fighter pilot. As a part of their daily routine, the two attended regular intelligence seminars which kept them apprised of all changes in code sequences and battle languages currently in effect among the hostile fleets. Neferah often attended these seminars along with them. As Hulican's adjutant, she wanted to be well-apprised of enemy activity.

Many of the intelligence lectures dealt with the current status of events in the area of hostilities, and covered background appraisals of, among other things, the G.C.C. attack on the Nashramh and its consequences. These listed the effects of Nashramh retaliation and battle losses, caused by the lack of in-depth and accurate information about enemy fleet movements. Only one new detail appeared since the first lecture that Miriam and Neferah had attended upon their arrival at the RAD station. No arrests of Nashramh personnel occurred on Odomak vessels; while the Odomak Navy continued to be rude and boorish, they had on this point, openly broken with the rest of the G.C.C. It appeared the Odomaks learned a costly lesson after the destruction of the Nashramh Embassy on Tristan III, back in 6988-6N5, and weren't going to repeat the mistake.

Upon hearing this latest information Miriam smiled inwardly. It seemed they'd learned a stern lesson long ago and determined never again to tangle with the Nashramh, whereas the other G.C.C. fleets hadn't yet discovered this for themselves.

The numerous briefings and seminars which Miriam and Cromel attended were mostly presented by both Nashramh and Ansharim personnel from all parts of this quadrant of the galaxy. The variety of physical forms and races with which Miriam had no previous contact was immense and astounded her, although she did recognize a few. At one of the briefings, a tall dark-skinned man sat next to her, and with an incredibly charming smile, introduced himself.

"You're Miriam B'Messiah, are you not?" he asked in a pleasant, clipped accent that reminded her of exotic places with spices and jewels. Unable to resist his smile, which reminded her of Ben Condon's, she nodded.

"Well, dear lady, I'm Ham Nedin, a friend of yours through a mutual friend of ours." He smiled brightly again, bent on being mischievous.

Miriam had only to think for a moment before she remembered what it was about him that seemed so familiar. "Are you talking about Sister-Magum Kim Navin?" she smiled back.

His smile broadened, if that was possible, and he laughed, "Yes!" The two chatted for several moments before the seminar began, and as she talked to the amiable man, she mused how much he looked like Kim. Both were from one of the sixth-arm's outer rimworlds. They were a gentle people and charming in their ways. He was extremely tall, and lean, almost lanky in build with aquiline features that were set off by large almond-shaped brown eyes. Miriam soon learned he wasn't a Magum, but that he and Kim had known each other over many generations.

Then there was the Arelim woman who addressed one briefing on G.C.C. tactics under development for use against the superior enemy. She was, like many inhabitants of the RAD station, a conventional-looking biped with only one major difference: her eyes. She had four eyes, all in a row; two directly on each side of her nose. Her two outer eyes were wrapped slightly around the side of her face toward her temples, so she appeared to only have two eyes when directly facing the audience. Despite this curious difference, she was one of the most beautiful women Miriam had ever seen. She seemed to be both old and young at the same time. Miriam later learned she was from one of four races of the Arelim; the other three races had only two eyes.

Miriam also met other members of Adato's strange race. She learned they were a tightly knit group who always held private bashes in each other's quarters. Miriam had not known it on the Claren Demorah, but most of Adato's people were fairly private, if not reclusive, around outsiders. Again it was Hulican who informed her of the differences in Adato which made her as open and friendly as she was. Jenn was almost overwhelmed by Adato when they first met, but with repeated exposure to the swarthy character, she grew to like her.

During her short stay on the RAD station, Miriam learned that most of the Ansharim personnel were Magums in both male and female bodies. All were top professionals and a pleasure to deal with. Their auxiliary personnel were mostly security men and specially trained soldiers, such as the two oversized men who'd escorted Jenn to Miriam's apartment. These were mostly husky and bearded types who took no nonsense from anyone. They were

always polite, and helpful. Jenn always remembered when one of the two who'd escorted her to Miriam's room had, at one of the private personnel functions, asked her to dance with him.

As Tom approached their table, he winked at Miriam and she winked back. Both had planned the plot. He strode up, and leering at Jenn, bowed. He kissed her hand, and rumbled, "May I have this dance, my Lady?"

Miriam stifled a laugh, and she treasured the choice look on Jenn's face when the elf simply blanked out. Just imagine! This monster had come back to eat her up!

When the wide-eyed Jenn didn't respond, he raised her to her feet. Picking her up, he proceeded to dance her out onto the floor.

Miriam and Neferah both broke out into happy laughter. Tom was so big, that he looked like he was holding a life-sized doll. Jenn hung limply, with her feet high above the dance floor, staring at his scruffy beard only two centimeters from her nose. She finally realized he wasn't going to eat her. After the dance, Tom gently replaced Jenn on her chair and kissed her hand again. Then bowing, he said happily, "Thank you my dear. You're a splendid dancer."

Watching this funny scene reminded Miriam once again of Ben Condon: "And eating little elves is my game."

Miriam saw Hulican once more during her stay at the RAD station. They met at one of the briefings, and afterwards had tea together in a cafe. Hulican was leaving in four days on a deep probe scout, and Neferah would leave with him. Over tea, they discussed the deteriorating conditions out on the rim and the terrible losses to the G.C.C.'s outer rim squadrons.

Hulican frowned into his honey tea, and his pale skin pulled so taut it appeared translucent. "If they don't come to their senses soon," he said slowly, sipping at his tea and looking thoughtfully at Miriam, "there'll be nothing left between Belial's forces and the inner galaxy except for us, the Odomaks, and the wreckage of the G.C.C. fleets. They'll have to sue for peace soon, or else go under."

Miriam agreed. "You really never know with the G.C.C. But I think it'll be a great relief when we finally know, so we can start supporting them. If they go under, we too, are lost."

Later, after lunch, the two shook hands and Hulican gave Miriam a warm hug. "Good hunting, little sister. I hope we meet again under better circumstances. Until then, take care."

Miriam nodded, kissed him on the cheek, and they parted company. She felt sad and hollow, as she always did at partings. What would it be like to be completely alone, without memory? How could one bear to part from friends and loved ones without knowing if they'd ever meet again? Eternity was so lonely, and each good-bye was like losing a part of her self. How could she, or anyone, survive that way, without any memory or ability to recognize an old friend if ever they met again?

Being a Magum, especially one with so very much to learn, was hard. She was relieved she wouldn't have to learn about and experience that ultimate loneliness. It was no wonder that prebinaries took so long to grow and mature, with the pain and fear that they had to experience time and again without conscious memory. The very idea frightened her. She could never rid herself of these thoughts, especially when she dealt with people who were not as yet binaries.

Miriam and Jenn sat talking in their comfortable living room after a long day's work. Their ship was leaving in several days, so they took what little time they had to spare for small pleasures that wouldn't be available on the tension-filled voyage. Soon they'd face the black ones for certain, and could only hope that nothing would go wrong.

Jenn had been pestering Miriam about how Neferah was doing and if she was safe. Miriam conversed with Hulican, now in the sub-binary aboard the 'SD Dark Mist-Tae', en route to a position far beyond the rim.

"All right, all right," Miriam laughed. "Neferah is fine, and Hulican says she's thinking about you."

Jenn beamed; her sadness over Neferah's avoiding her on Styx Able IV seemed to be all but past, and now she missed her friend. She understood that Miriam could communicate with other Magums, although she didn't know exactly how.

"Miriam," she said a few moments later, a serious look on her face, "I don't really understand about Hulican. Neferah says he's a woman in a man's body. I heard what you told us about him being a Magum and all that, but I still don't know. Isn't that funny?"

Miriam carefully explained the situation to Jenn about the masculine and feminine elements that make up the Magum complex, just as Hulican explained it to her. Finally Jenn nodded.

"Oh, that's good. I mean, I thought that he might be, well, you know. . . ."

Miriam laughed. "Homosexual? No, it doesn't occur in Magum situations. What you're asking about sometimes happens if, by some mistake, a strong feminine intellect is born into a male body, and vice versa, right? Believe me it happens all too often, especially in the uncontrollable circumstances on many primitive worlds. Of course, homosexuality can also come about by many other factors, either good or bad ones, but that's another story. But when a prebinary person enters a body other than one of his or her own intrinsic makeup, there can indeed be a great deal of difficulty, for the clothes we wear, our body, in many ways controls our actions and attitudes."

"You mean that when I'm dead I'll still be a girl?" Jenn asked, mystified.

"Oh, boy, what have I got myself into now?" Miriam laughed again, "That's a tough one, but let's see what I can do with it."

Pausing for a moment to consider her answer, Miriam began. "As I've been taught, the Eternal our Creator, which is also a subject for another time, through internal processes, has generated the reflective and causative universes. With this came the separation of the created self into opposing components such as male and female. This doesn't necessarily mean masculine and feminine in sexual terms, as it does with our bodies, but rather the basic makeup of our souls which reflect these characteristics. The male is normally strong externally and inherently dominating and seeking to conquer. However, the female is internally strong and inherently bent upon controlling and stabilizing her environment because she's the repository of regenerative life. It is, I understand, intended by our Creator that the two will eventually come together as one after each has learned the riddle of causative reality through many lifetimes of experience. After each of us has lived and experienced each part of our Creator's causative reality, we'll never be the same again and we'll become something new. . . ."

Miriam stared off into the distance for a moment, then, abruptly snapped back. "Of course if one were to only experience lives in the bodies of our own intellectual gender, then a strong polarity is created which makes any kind of interchange difficult emotionally. We all experience our opposite gender at one time or another during our journey through causative time. Anyway, in a

Magum situation, there are ten people fused into one personality-complex, both individual and collective, and they're quite able to accept and make do with whatever body is in use. If it's a masculine body, then the masculine face comes to the surface, and vice versa. Does that answer your question?"

Jenn looked a little dubious. "But why did the Creator split the created self?"

Miriam laughed and shook her head. "Well, that's a long story, and also a subject for another time. Right now I'm going to hit the sack since tomorrow will be another long day."

Chapter 17

Briefing

Time and space seem quite simple to understand . . . that is until we travel faster than temporal light in the sub-binary.

13:45-01 DEMIN 6191-7N5

During her last few days at the RAD station, Miriam worked directly with members of the combat intelligence center's crew, programming the organic computer data banks with all known information on the enemy and the G.C.C. This included several new programs on deciphering codes, which were created with techniques discovered by the RAD's joint communications project team, of which Jenn was a member.

Arvon Ohrn accompanied Sister-Captain Bish Roanim aboard her vessel, the SD Whisper-Lal, to supervise the final in-place testing of the ship's new cloaking system. They were joined by Sister-Commander Liax Turnal, the Whisper's security officer. As the three toured the vessel, Captain Roanim introduced Arvon to her crew. About half an hour later, they encountered Miriam working in the combat intelligence center.

Bish, a short, stocky woman with ash hair, brown eyes, and the reflexes of a cat, had been captain of the Whisper for nearly 50 years. She was still getting used to the new modifications, such as the sub-molecular cloaking system and removal of most of her vital primary weapons systems. She wasn't sure if she'd like it. After all, no warship should be out on the rim without her full weapons complement. If Council Central wanted her stripped, then that was what would be done.

As she and Arvon entered the CIC, Bish spoke about the Robel drive's operating characteristics. Catching sight of Miriam, at one of the computer consoles, she introduced the two.

"Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah, I want you to meet one of our esteemed allies and, in a way, our benefactor: Brother-Magum Arvon Ohrn, you already know Commander Turnal."

Miriam stood up and shook hands with the dark, stocky man. "It's good to meet you, Arvon," she said, looking into his soft black eyes. With his pinched expression he seemed rather introverted-looking, but something else about him interested her.

Bish continued on. "It was through Brother Arvon's prompting that the Ansharim consented to entrust us with the latest model of their sub-molecular cloaking system." She smiled. "It beats everything in the field and leaves no visual distortion whatsoever," she added confidently.

Miriam nodded. "Impressive. What about weapons? If for some reason our lasers have to be used, can they be fired through the cloaking system?"

"Yes," Bish answered. "It does so without distortion since its three sub-molecular systems are similar to components in our primary shields."

Miriam nodded again. "You say it leaves no distortion. Does this mean the enemy can't lock in on us with their mass displacement scanners?" This, the Nashramh found, occurred in tests of their own cloaking systems. If anything at all indicated the presence of a warship out in the void, the mass displacement scanners could detect it. As yet, the G.C.C. had no such scanners, much less effective cloaking devices or the Robel drive. Unfortunately, they had no idea whether or not the enemy did.

Bish answered, "No. Since there's absolutely no distortion of the refracted light, there's nothing for the enemy scanners to lock onto." She paused for a moment, then, asked, "Did I hit all the high points, Arvon?"

The man snuffled with a smile. "Not really. I don't see anyone genuflecting or singing out in awed praise."

"Well, there I go again," Bish responded, "I can't even keep my priorities in order."

Miriam smiled. "We really do appreciate your valuable aid, Arvon."

He smiled back. "It's really a two-way affair, Admiral B'Mesziah. Your Sisterhood has shared your advance drive technology with us, along with many more of your closely guarded secrets. It's our policy to respond in kind."

He appraised her. "And, I believe, you were on the Gale Robel when the new drive system was discovered. I wish we had time to discuss your experience and impressions on that voyage, but unfortunately we don't."

Miriam accompanied the two on the rest of the tour and assisted them in supervising the tests. Everything worked with precision.

During the tour, Miriam studied this dark-skinned Magum carefully. His oddly casual remarks, were stated with some hidden purpose behind them, suggested he was far more than he appeared to be. There was no question in her mind that he knew everything there was to know about her, and was, in a way, giving her a hint about something as yet undisclosed.

The deep probe scout 'SD Whisper-Lal' began her initial prevoyage disembarkation procedure from the RAD station as the ship's outer airlock shut, locked, and sealed. The crew of 31 systematically began testing each system and reporting its status to the bridge, where Bish Roanim verified each report against her own check-list.

The Whisper was a sleek arrowhead-shaped vessel, measuring 900 meters in length and 82 meters in width. She was also 15 meters-high at her stern and tapered to 5 meters at her bow.

Yet, for such a small vessel, she had an amazing range and could remain in deep space without resupply for ten years'. This was facilitated by internal material-recycling systems which incorporated a high-yield hydroponics garden facility. This system not only produced vegetables and fruits, but also provided support to the ship's atmospheric rectification function. Miriam had seen a similar facility on the SD Claren Demorah.

The Whisper carried two Class I Lifeboat-Fighters which accommodated 17 individuals each and stores of dried and recycled foods for six months. Each vessel had only two months operational time in the sub-binary whether fully loaded or not.

Aside from the new sub-molecular cloaking system, the Whisper carried thermal mines and torpedo canisters, two high-gain laser generators, and special long-range communications

equipment of the latest design. The Whisper was, in fact, a super auditory system tuned into both the enemy's and the G.C.C.'s communications grids.

The docking bay's mammoth hangar doors opened, exposing the dimly lit 12-kilometer-diameter tunnel on gridscreens located throughout the Whisper. Computer-rectified holographic images of the trajectory grid appeared in front of the helm, and readouts of acceleration factors flashed on the bridge's gridscreen. All the necessary data for entering or leaving the long tunnel showed clearly to everyone on the darkened bridge as the hangar lights dimmed then blanked out. Miriam felt a sense of awe as she watched the proceedings on the CIC's viewscreen. Jenn, who sat wide-eyed next to her, felt she could almost hear the low, momentous rumbles of the huge doors as they slowly swung open, although she knew they made no sound in the vacuum of the void.

A single grapple, almost as long as the Whisper herself, slowly extended, pushing the warship out of the hangar and into the tunnel. Miriam sensed the Whisper's movement, although she felt disoriented, as if driving in a completely blackened tunnel.

Within minutes, the grapple gently released the Whisper, and withdrew into the darkened hangar. As Miriam and the rest of the crew paid attention to their exit, the massive hangar doors slid shut.

Once the Whisper hung suspended in the middle of the tunnel, the few remaining lights in the tunnel dulled into total blackness, and the gridscreen's target grid glowed directly in front of them. Somewhere far ahead the outer doors, larger than the inner bay ones by far, slowly slid open. Their massive hatches disappeared into chambers built below the surface of the moon instead of opening outward. They exposed brilliant starfields, which dimly lit the end of the tunnel.

The Whisper remained motionless, awaiting final clearance for takeoff. Miriam felt her body tense as adrenalin rushed through her and heightened her senses. Jenn also felt her heartbeat speed up. She tried to breathe normally, sure that everyone would hear the booming of her heart, but to no avail. She was just too excited.

"SD Whisper-Lal, NP-395C, cleared for takeoff," a crystal-clear voice spoke over the ship's comm-link. Within a few seconds, a green beacon began to flash against the tunnel's far-off wall as another lit up on the captain's console aboard the waiting ship.

Bish acknowledged the go-ahead. "Proceed at one-quarter impulse power." Two minutes later she ordered full impulse thrust. The Whisper began to accelerate. Suddenly, it shot down the long tunnel and out into open space as if fired from a rifle. The moon's dim parent planet was on the other side of the station, so the helm didn't need to compensate for its mass.

One by one, 258 other deep probe scout vessels shot out of the open tunnel, and once free from the small moon, set their helms toward their assigned patrol grids.

Miriam sat spellbound throughout the entire takeoff procedure, thrilled by the rapid acceleration which pressed her body back into the deep cushions of her command chair. Now she fully understood why all the chairs were so well-built and heavily padded.

Next to her, Jenn sat wide-eyed with surprise and apprehension as she stared blankly at the main viewscreen from the CIC on the lower level of the bi-level bridge. She gasped as the small light as the end of the tunnel grew rapidly to a large saucer filled with sparkling stars. Suddenly there were only the stars, myriads of them sparkling in the void.

Jenn slowly let her breath out, which she gulped in after the rapid acceleration pressed her back against her seat and forced the air out of her lungs.

"My god, Miriam! That was great!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Wow! They can do that again a hundred times and I'll love it every time!"

Miriam laughed, you're not alone," she smiled. It was the most thrilling ride she'd ever been on, too.

Now the serious business began with aligning her helm to the proper coordinates. Bish's staff went over each factor in navigational alignment meticulously and verified them for absolute accuracy. They correlated the internal timing system between the navi-computer's biomechanism and the sub-binary drive's biochemical controls.

The 15-second alarm sounded throughout the Whisper as the navigational and drive units came together in their fine-wave merging sequence. At precisely 06:45, the Whisper dropped into the sub-binary, beginning her six-month voyage to a point far beyond the Starset's outer rim. The total distance from RAD Station IV-2134 to her duty station would be 406,000 light years to

beyond the furthest known star system in the sixth-arm. The Whisper would remain on station for eight years before being relieved by another cloak probe scout vessel, and she would monitor all signals and report them to Council Central for further analysis and adjudication.

In this latter respect, Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah was the single most important individual on the ship. Without her, no communications could be forwarded to Council Central and the early warning system would be ineffective. Communications in this system had to be instantaneous to have any real effect on the enemy invasion fleet's detection and interception. Without this early warning system and its instant communications, the war would certainly be lost.

Miriam and Jenn ate lunch together. It always amused Miriam to watch Jenn eat, for while she wasn't as haphazard as she'd been as a child, she still demonstrated some very interesting tactics for attacking food.

Miriam had always known Jenn to be adventurous, but when it came to food, she wasn't. Oh, she'd try any kind of desert offered, and if given a choice between two or three, she commonly answered, "yes." But when it came to the rest of her diet, she stuck mainly to vegetables, nuts, fruits, and breads. She never touched meat. Miriam suspected Jenn's Meszian ties were still close to her, and since all Meszians were symbiotic, they didn't eat meat.

Of course Miriam tried a variety of different dishes from all reaches of the sixth-arm, since her ten Magum components had various tastes and experiences with them. Granted, one of her components, say Telenji, didn't come forward and say, "I think I'll eat some spiced meat and ginger-laced bread," but instead Miriam always knew if she would like some exotic food, and if she would not.

In the middle of lunch, Jenn, who'd been strangely quiet all morning, piped up. "Miriam, just what is the sub-binary? I know what they said in school, but their formulas don't help me understand it intellectually. Something just doesn't fall into place."

Miriam nearly choked on her limonade. "Boy, you sure ask me the hard ones, don't you?" she laughed as soon as she could breathe again. "For me to tell you everything involved would take years of reexplaining mathematical and intellectual problems. Would a brief overview do?"

Jenn nodded. "I don't want all the details, since that's where I probably got lost in the first place. What I'm curious about is just what is it that we're traveling in now and how we do it."

Miriam nodded, pouring more iced limonade.

"Do you remember all those great little games we played as children?" Those had been good times, carefree times of laughter and freedom.

Wrinkling her forehead, Jenn nodded. "You know, it's funny, but after we played those games, I always seemed to know more about my tests. Now isn't that odd?"

Miriam felt like laughing again. It had taken Jenn this long to find out the real purpose of those games. "Yes. Well anyway, do you remember when I told you about time?"

"Yes. I remember you said something about divisions of time."

"Right, time as a whole, or eternity, is referred to as 'fluid'. This means that time flows in any direction, as water in a sponge flows in, out, and through.

"Usually we refer to the two divisions of eternity as 'air' and 'ether'. Ether means the essence of time, or explained in another way, the system of nonsequential events. This is a rather abstract concept that may be best equated with the process of dreams or incorporeal thoughts. By this, I mean thoughts we have which have nothing to do with the here and now. They can range from abstract memories to fantasies. The ether is that point wherein conscious awareness exists, but isn't necessarily corporeal in its substance or genesis. Now have I lost you yet, Jenn?"

Jenn thought for a while. "I think I understand," she finally replied.

"All right, air, on the other hand, refers to the winds of time, or rather sequential time as we know it." Jenn looked slightly confused, but Miriam pressed on.

"We live in the time-space continuum, which I've told you refer to both the ethereal, or reflective realities, and the temporal, or substantial and causative realities. It's in the ethereal that we experience nonsequential awareness, as I am sure you recognize from your dreams. In your dreams, you don't usually experience things as you do when you are awake; by this I mean, that dreams are a reality which is subject to ever-changing time flows and experiences. You might be influenced by a dream, but you do not

exert any causation on reality; this only happens when you're awake." Jenn nodded slowly, assimilating this.

"But when we're awake in our corporeal bodies, we occupy a stationary spot in the flow of time; we call that spot 'now'. And the 'now' of our physical existence occupies only one position, 'the present'. As things happen now, they're like grains of sand which appear to blow in the wind and finally come together in a permanent form. Once something happens, it can never unhappen. So, we refer to things that've already happened as the past, and to things that are happening as the present. Those things which will happen we refer to as the future. This is what we know as linear, or sequential time. It's like a flow of particles carried by the air; they each take up time and space, but all have spaces between them."

Jenn looked mystified by this, and Miriam waved her hand. "Don't worry, I don't understand it all myself. But, you do know that when a person dies, she sheds her body. This is like taking off clothes - you may take off your coat and look different, but you're still the same person with one alteration. You won't be wearing the coat, right?"

Jenn nodded; this, at least, seemed familiar. "And you said that when someone dies, they just float around until they enter a new body," she piped in.

"In some cases, such as on primitive worlds, that's true. But for instance, after the war is over, if any of us are still around to fight, do you know what we're going to do?" Jenn shook her head. "We are going to send out mortuary vessels to retrieve our own. You see, when a person is killed out in the void, she may still remain with her body, or attach herself to a familiar object if her body's been destroyed, or, in some cases, be lost forever for unknown reasons. But the mortuary vessels will scour the battle zones for Gamma-B's, that is, for our souls, and place them in special crystals so we may return home again and not be lost in the void."

Jenn nodded again. "But what does this have to do with the sub-binary?" she asked.

"That's coming up. But, with these examples, I'm trying to illustrate a point. Both the ethereal domain and temporal realm occupy the same space. We're always in contact with the ethereal even while alive, just as dreams illustrate. Did you ever notice that cats dream more than we do? Or that a person who lacks regular

sleep is oddly different? Sleep, and more importantly, dreams, are our only real contact with the ethereal realm of ideas and unrestricted forms of time and space, and are very important to us. Without them, we can't function properly."

Leaning back, Miriam returned to the original subject, "Now, back to the sub-binary and your original question. Both the ethereal and temporal complexes exist in the same space at all times, although not in the same form; you will learn that later. And since we live in a universe where time is linear, it would take us hundreds of thousands of years to arrive at our destination if we reached the speed of temporal light. But, what if we found a way to enter nonsequential time so we transcended sequential time limits and exceed the speed of temporal light? In other words, what if we left the temporal universe and moved between all of those grains of time into the past, just far enough so that we arrive at our destination somewhere close to the time we actually left our starting point? Of course we would have also advanced in temporal time, but not anywhere near the linear time light takes to travel those distances."

Jenn nodded, the idea slowly dawning on her. "So, the sub-binary is actually leaving our temporal universe, sort of like dying and coming back to life somewhere else?"

"In a way, but we don't die. We never actually enter the ethereal, but we do enter a zone just between the two complexes. We alter our atomic structure so we occupy an area which is somewhat like a plasma layer between the two planes and use a process much like temporal thought to guide us through to our destination. This is, of course, a very simple explanation of how it works. About 10,000 years ago we discovered that there are different shades, or levels, of the plasma layer between the binary complexes and how to alter our atomic makeup to increase our ability to move along it more efficiently. Therefore, we are now able to move from one place in the temporal universe to another many times faster than either the G.C.C. or the black ones." She stopped and sipped her limonade.

Jenn finally began to understand, and together they talked about other aspects of the sub-binary for several hours afterwards.

And so the deep probe cloak scout SD Whisper-Lal, moved outward from the sixth-arm in the semi-ethereal sub-binary toward her ultimate destination.

Chapter 18

Whisper

When the enemy invasion fleet arrived, we faced a new reality we were hardly prepared for . . . both from within ourselves and from them . . . there are always surprises.

21:21-14 JERIN 6191-7N5

Bish Roanim sat comfortably in her new command chair, which after several months of full use, still looked as new as when it was installed at the RAD station.

The Whisper had broken into temporal space two hours earlier, having reached her destination far beyond the Starset's outer rim. Bish immediately ordered activation of both her cloaking system and mass displacement scanners. If there were any enemy patrols out here, she didn't want to attract their attention.

When Bish was satisfied with the cloaking system, she verified their her navigational coordinates and extended the main dish and six other whip antennae. Once all sections reported systems functioning, the crew began the long, tedious routine of monitoring and observing the grid area in earnest.

Bish detailed the incoming reports from all stations to Miriam, who in turn, forwarded the information to Council Central, listing the current status of the Whisper as 'condition green'. This done, she leaned back in her own command chair, in the CIC's situation room below the main bridge, and studied the bridge's 20-meter-diameter spherical gridscreen. The large curved screen, could be viewed though the room's forward section, and displayed a panoramic view of the Starset's outer rim. The view was awesome,

and during the next few hours, everyone aboard the vessel gaped at it when they had the opportunity.

They were far from the outer star systems; the Whisper was positioned so that she looked up at the leading edge of the sixth-arm. The actual outline wasn't obvious, since she was only 150 light years out, the gridscreen showed a thick mass of star systems trailing into fine clustered mists, then into the blackness of the sparsely speckled void. Far off to the right, Miriam fancied she could see just a bit of the trailing edge of the fifth-arm, although she wasn't certain if it might just be a bulge in the leading edge of the sixth.

Smiling, Miriam mused that Sister-Navigator Kyung Thorin, an avid astronomer, would love all the time she now had to study the marvels from this unclouded position. Although the Nashramh had long since been able to travel such distances as the Whisper had - even farther - they'd been consumed in preparing for this upcoming invasion and couldn't spare any meaningful scientific survey missions for in-depth research of extragalactic space. It was also Kyung's own hope that in this position, unclouded by masses within the galaxy, she might find some evidence linking the black ones to a particular galaxy.

Outside the mass of the Starset's sixth-arm, loomed the void, surrounded in the distance by brilliantly speckled lights, the jewels of the Creator's universe. It was amazing to think these pinpricks of light weren't mere stars, but entire galaxies existing at distances beyond the limits of human imagination.

These thoughts had such an impact on Miriam's senses that she suddenly realized just how far away from tangible civilization she'd come, and it took her breath away. The Nashramh had explored only a small corner of the Sunset: parts of the first and sixth arms, which held their own worlds of origin and some of the seventh. They still had the rest of the galaxy to explore and become acquainted with before even thinking of moving onto another.

Miriam frowned to herself - the black ones were certainly advanced. They had, she surmised, already conquered their own galaxy, and perhaps others, and were now coming after this one. God! What were other galaxies like?

On the bridge, Bish stared intently at the gridscreen, in part musing over similar thoughts to Miriam's. She sighed, looking out into the void. From all estimates based upon previous scout

probes, the enemy should surface into temporal space somewhere between the Whisper and the outer rim, most probably between five and ten light years away. Hence, there'd be no visual contact initially, although the Whisper's sub-binary displacement probes would pick up any such activity within a few moments of the enemy's appearance, depending on how far away they broke out of the plasma layer between the sub-binary and temporal plates.

As she reclined, studying the screen, Bish munched on some sweet nascove crackers and sipped hot tea. She knew - could feel - that things would be happening very soon now. It was a damned good thing that the G.C.C. combined commands finally sued for peace, three months ago on the 20th of SHIKIM. Now G.C.C. Admiralty was being given huge doses of intelligence information and current enemy signals. It was clear the G.C.C. made the right decision in suing for peace, since now their losses had dropped drastically and their kill ratio in enemy craft improved geometrically.

Bish shook her head. "The G.C.C. has lost, according to Nashramh estimates, more than a million vessels to enemy action, and these were just probing raids! Most of these losses could have been prevented had the combined navies accepted Nashramh intelligence data and early warning signals beforehand. But that time is now past, and everybody is working together against their common enemy. If the G.C.C. still believes the Nashramh collaborated with the black ones, they don't show it.

The most disturbing thing about the upcoming invasion is that it is so damned predictable. Not only are there numerous clues from intercepted enemy codes and signals, which are readily translated by Nashramh intelligence specialists, but also the events occurring on enemy dominated rimworlds spells this out. For more than a century, increased religious frenzies has swelled among murmured rumors that Sargon, Sweet Sargon, is coming to claim his own. The violent attacks on G.C.C. outposts by the enemy's allies, has risen into the thousands. Since we destroyed the last resident Sargon over 10,000 years ago, analysts have predicted a new one is on his way. Enemy codes have confirmed this, naming Josargon as the lord of his Legions of Light, who will deliver our Starset galaxy to his father Samael."

Each week during the Whisper's patrol watch, at least two squadrons of enemy probe craft traveled through her grid. They

normally broke into temporal space about 2.5 light years away, and after making course corrections, dropped back into the sub-binary. Sister-Navigator Kyung Thorin used these regular occasions to study their trajectories. Using the Whisper's sub-binary displacement probes, she ascertained the relative sizes, types of vessels, exact numbers, and probable destinations of the enemy warships. Miriam, in turn, reported to Council Central.

Four weeks after the first enemy probes passed through their gridstation, something happened on the bridge which Miriam never forgot. Jenn, who'd just broken another enemy code, entered the bridge to discuss it with Bish. Miriam stood next to Bish's command chair, planning to have chow with Jenn afterwards.

A bright red light began to blink on the command chair, and simultaneously the helm reported. "Captain, another probe group on the way, and this one looks like it'll come close."

All attention went to the gridscreen as Bish nodded and sat stiffly, alert for any surprises. Even with the cloaking system fully activated, no one aboard the Whisper felt truly safe and invisible.

Within seconds of the report, a squadron of enemy cruisers broke into temporal space 150,000 kilometers from the Whisper. Their presence generated a feeling of incredible wrongness and hostility among all of the ship's crew. A few minutes later, the immense black vessels dropped back into the sub-binary, their sleek forms consumed by plasmatic mists which couldn't be seen; the effect was that the huge ships gradually disappeared into a cloud.

As soon as the enemy vessels left, Miriam slackened and closed her eyes, concentrating so she could relay a visual to Council Central. Within minutes she'd finished, and turning to relay her return message to Bish, she saw Jenn.

In the tenseness of the moment, everyone had forgotten the quiet elf that was on the bridge with them, looking wide-eyed with horror at the enemy vessels which were magnified on the gridscreen. They hadn't seen her slide to the deck in a faint of complete terror.

With Kyung's help, Miriam got Jenn back to their cabin and revived her. As Jenn regained consciousness, she moaned and her eyelids flickered. Then she stiffened and her eyes snapped open.

Until now, everything Jenn heard about the black enemy was in lessons of one kind or another. None of them seemed real, like

Miriam's experiences at Borgdragon. This, her first sighting of the huge black ships, filled her with a nameless terror, whereas the others on the bridge were used to seeing enemy manifestations.

Miriam patted Jenn on her shoulder and readjusted the damp cloth on her forehead. "Relax, Jenn, everything's all right."

Her eyes wide and darting, Jenn announced, "I want to go home, now!"

Shaking her head, Miriam calmed her in a soft, soothing voice. "Now Jenn, you know that's not possible. This ship can't move until we receive orders to do so."

Jenn struggled to a sitting position and shook her head wildly, panic gripping her in an icy clamp. She'd finally come to realize what this war was really about . . . something that even Telakin's death and Neftalak's departure hadn't brought home to her. When she'd seen the black cruisers, she felt an incredible, chilling, confident empathy which told her the enemy would destroy everything. She wasn't going to get tortured like all those poor people at Borgdragon had been. Oh no, no way, oh no, no, no. . . .

Gripped by a consuming sense of total helplessness and fear, Jenn cried, "but what can we do, Miriam? We're so small and are nothing compared to them. We don't know what kind of weapons they have, or even where they come from. What do they want from us? What have we ever done to them? They're so terribly black, so cruel, inhuman monsters, Miriam, I'm scared!"

Miriam felt a whole universe of force behind Jenn's frantic words and knew the little elf wanted to go away and hide. She tried to soothe Jenn, but also to help her face the realities of the situation.

"Jenn, we don't know what the black ones want, or why they want to conquer our galaxy. I guess it's just for ego. You know, ego? When someone feels more important than anyone else and should have control of everything." Jenn nodded, still shaking and shivering.

"We know the black ones are devoted to a dogma of totally objective justice and want absolute conformity to Samael's dictates. And, indeed, Adam Belial's Legions of Light are efficient, and persuasive. This makes them a dangerous opponent, especially since there are people within our own galaxy who agree with their doctrines. There are totalitarian societies out on the rim, controlled by dictatorial governments that strip people of their

individuality and will to think independently. They're reduced to uniformly grey masses of slaves, dependent upon central control from either their government or god for all decisions and directions. They are without personal importance and must subject themselves to their masters will."

Jenn shook her head.

"Jenn, we of the Nashramh have a great deal of experience with Belial's Legions of Light and know the price that must be paid to survive in their sterile and efficient societies. The price is our very humanity, for we are reduced to nothing more than colonies of ants working our lives away for bare survival. We know our human races are immature and susceptible to Belial's persuasive doctrines. But we also know we can grow up to be free and compassionate despite the pitfalls that block our progress. We have no other choice than to fight Samael and his warrior ants, since they've made all of the rules. There is no other choice, Jenn."

Jenn was still shivering. Miriam patted her on the shoulder. "I know you are afraid of them, Jenn; so am I."

"You are?" Jenn asked incredulously, Miriam afraid? She couldn't believe that Miriam, who knew about everything, could be afraid.

"Of course I am, Jenn!" Miriam admonished. "I'm as afraid of the black ones as you are perhaps more, since I know what's at stake. I'm as afraid of them as I am of losing you, and of losing the Nashramh, which is my only family. And you're right; they have many frightening and awesome things about them. I don't know how their weapons work or where they come from. Maybe we'll find out if we ever capture one of their ships intact. But that's for another time, for another war, one we can take the offensive in. Right now we're fighting a defensive war for our very survival, not only for our sisterhood's survival, but for the countless trillions of human beings throughout our galaxy."

Miriam closed her eyes a little, and her voice dropped. She appeared to be talking to herself instead of Jenn.

"I'm so afraid of them, and of what they'll do to us. Oh, I know that even if they weren't trying to conquer our galaxy, with systematic subversion and corruption, there'd still be much of the evil and hostility that's already here. We have our own forms of evil. But they use it in so many ways and so relentlessly that I wonder if anyone can be trusted, and if we can hope to win over

them at all . . ." In her mind, she saw Alsis again, and this gave her resolve for what she had to do. There was no turning back.

Straightening, Miriam saw Jenn was still sobbing and shaking with the jerky spasms that come with hysteria and crying too much.

"Jenn, look at me," she ordered. Jenn looked up, then down again, flinching. Miriam took her friend's arms and pulled her so that their eyes met; Jenn's were red-rimmed and hollow with fear.

Miriam spoke again in a soothing voice. "It appears as if there's nothing we of the Nashramh, or anyone else, can do. Perhaps there is nothing. But the cold equation is this, Jenn," and she gave her a shake. "We're all this galaxy has. We, and perhaps the brotherhood, are the only ones who stand between the black ones and the heart of our galaxy. If we give up out of our fear, if we run away and hide, trying to pretend nothing is wrong, the black ones will win. And that's what they want us to do - to flee, to panic and in our desperation deliver ourselves to them. Do you remember the tapes I showed you?"

At Ling Wall, Miriam had shown Jenn memory tapes of lessons she'd learned at Borgdragon. Many of them depicted invasion tactics used by the black ones, including what happened to the populations of different worlds afterwards. Jenn nodded slowly, more alert now.

"Do you want those atrocities to happen to you? Do you want that to happen to Myrnah, to Telakin?" Miriam's voice grew sharp; now it softened again as Jenn's eyes widened and she started.

"Yes, I know Telakin is dead, and presumably lost, but he won't always be. There might come the time in the future when he's young and innocent as Myrnah is now. Do you want the same things to happen to them as were shown in those tapes?"

Jenn started to pull away; she didn't want to hear this.

"Damn it Jenn! Listen to me! Do you want to have your little Myrnah raped by beasts at the age of 12, to have Kin forced into Belial's Legions of Light?"

Jenn jerked, trying to cover her eyes, and whimpered.

"Do you?"

"No," she answered in a small, pale voice.

"Jenn, I know you don't want to hear this, but you're going to, anyway." Jenn knew Miriam was going to have her say, every last word of it.

Miriam went on without pausing. "We have to do all we can to fight the black ones. God, I know how terrifying they are, but I want you to know something I've told few others. I once lived on a world in which women were nothing more than toys for brutish males to use. My poor mother died a young woman, in her early twenties, all used up and old and with no one to care about her. My father hated her because she didn't bear him sons, boys for Sweet Sargon!" Miriam's tone was bitter. "And he, the poor demented creature, was looked upon as a failure because his wife had desecrated him with such folly."

Jenn nodded silently; she already knew of Smon.

"I don't ever want that to happen to you, or to your lovely children, or to anyone else's. We must do everything we can to help, even if it means throwing sticks, stones and our naked bodies at the enemy's damned ships!"

Jenn nodded, then, broke down, sobbing. She was afraid, but she knew she'd have to help all she could. "Miriam, it's just not fair!"

Miriam slipped her arms around her friend and smoothed her hair. Holding the shaky Jenn, Miriam felt a deep tenderness for the little elf wash over her. Jenn was such an innocent person, and it wasn't fair that such innocents should have to face this terrible reality; there was no justice here. Miriam felt Jenn's face, hot and fevered, pressed against her shoulder, and could hear her sobbing, no longer hysterical. "I know, Jenn. But nothing is ever fair."

Jenn sat up, shuddering and snuffling, as she wiped her eyes and nodded.

After this incident, Miriam spoke to Bish in private. "I'd like my adjutant to work on grid-surveillance for a few hours each day, if you'll allow." She wanted Jenn to get used to seeing what they were up against, to toughen her up.

Bish agreed, and the next day, Jenn began her new duty as a break from her translation work.

Jenn was in the CIC, routinely watching her grid-scanner when she noticed something odd registering on it. The disturbance was calibrated into a broad band of sub-binary communications channels. Whatever it was, it made her uncomfortable, so she notified Captain Roanim and Miriam of the odd behavior on her gridscanner. Then, still nervous, she rubbed her shoulder and

sipped at her tea, trying to rid herself of a sudden chill that crawled up the back of her neck.

Bish was the first to arrive at CIC and she peered over Jenn's shoulder at the odd signals. Something about its growing intensity irritated her, so on a cautious impulse, she decided to prepare for the worst. Before heading back to the bridge, she ordered general quarters.

Klaxons sounded shrilly throughout the vessel, and off duty crew members headed for their battle stations. Everyone was already dressed in her permanent attire of an environmental uniform with the headgear strapped to her left shoulder, and at general quarters, all put their headgear on. No one was taking any chances.

Without warning, a mammoth object broke into temporal space about 100 kilometers from the Whisper. And then, minutes afterwards, another, and another. . . .

Bish sat facing the gridscreen on the bridge. As soon as she arrived, she'd turned to the bridge comm-link with the Combat Intelligence Center's grid-surveillance officer for information on the unusual sub-binary disturbance; at the woman's awed gasp, she swiveled around in her command chair. She confronted the magnified view on the bridge's gridscreen, which made the activity appear as close as if the Whisper was only a few hundred meters away.

In all, 3,000 medium sized enemy cruisers entered temporal space, altered their courses, and dropped back into the sub-binary. Bish felt the usual chills of fear as she watched the small fleet on the nonmagnified screen.

Kyung Thorin rechecked her coordinates, and matched them with the course corrections made by the enemy fleet. She did this through a complicated use of vectors and mathematics drawn from the sub-binary disturbance. Rising from her seat, she strode to Bish's command chair and handed her data pad to the captain. "There's no question about it. They're headed directly for star group UP8816U and should arrive there in seven months."

Bish nodded. "Did you catch that, Miriam? We have them pegged," she said over the open comm-link to Miriam in CIC.

"Yes, Captain, I heard. Just give me a few moments."

Miriam transmitted the facts to Council Central, which in turn informed her of similar occurrences within the same time period as

reported from other grid areas. It looked like a general offensive was beginning.

Forty-two hours later, the strange signals appeared again on the CIC scanners. Shortly after, another 3,000 enemy medium battle cruisers broke into temporal space, made course corrections, and dropped back into the sub-binary, making directly for star group UP8816U.

Things began to get interesting. Within two weeks, reports from other Nashramh and Ansharim vessels were collated and formed into a comprehensive analysis of the enemy's fleet structure and apparent destination. During the next month, more than a million medium and heavy battle cruisers were sighted and recorded. All moved towards the same destination.

Bish called Miriam to the bridge after one of these sightings. "Miriam, what does Council Central have to say about the information we've been getting?" Bish wanted a second opinion about what she feared.

Miriam stood still, frowning. Should I worry her, she mused, then decided to go ahead with a full answer. After all, if Bish asked the question, she must have an idea what the answer was.

Speaking in a low voice, she admitted, "it seems these vessels we've been watching are just preliminary probe and scout ships, meant for skirmishes, although we aren't sure. I sense this isn't the main thrust of their incursion. There just aren't enough units involved, even with the enemy's advanced technology, to constitute a full invasion force."

Bish raised an inquisitive eyebrow, and Miriam pursued the subject. "After all, with the effectiveness of the enemy's weapons systems and their element of surprise so certain, they would feel confident enough to come in small numbers. Ah . . . but they have both confidence and ego. Our previous experience with them, suggests they'll come with overwhelming numbers to create an absolute sense of panic among the G.C.C. fleets. They mean to wipe us out so completely that we won't have a leg to stand on and will lose our will to resist. These vessels must be skirmishers."

Bish nodded. She'd also surmised this, for it seemed to be a logical action for an advanced navy. What frightened her was the future. What was yet to come? Just what would the enemy send?

G.C.C. Admiralty's analysts suspected the same as well, and dispatched only a third of their frontline fleet to the estimated

battle zone. This force numbered 2,500,000 ships of all classes and sizes. The analysts still felt helpless, knowing the power and status of the enemy vessels, which were said to be on the way. If the information supplied to them by the Nashramh was correct, the G.C.C. would have the element of surprise. This was their most important asset.

It looked like a mammoth, sleek black fish slowly emerging from a dark, empty, ocean as Bish Roanim sat, her mouth hanging open in surprise, watching it appear on her gridscreen.

Bish tried to shake herself, to remind herself that she sat in the command chair, and that no matter how shaken she was, it must never show. Not now, not when the others needed a pillar of strength.

"By the Eternal's Light!" she managed to exclaim, in a half whisper, breaking the spell hanging over her.

Her voice sharpening, Bish swung around in her chair. "What in hell is it? Kyung! Get readings and data shots on that thing!"

Kyung, her eyes wide, swiveled to her console and shot reprofices of the huge craft. Then, entering these into the organic-biocomplex computer, her console rectifier projected a tiny holographic model of the warship, detailing accurate dimensions within seconds.

Still the huge vessel was engaged in its transition from the sub-binary to temporal space. Bish shook her head in horror. How could they even hope to fight this?

"Captain," Kyung snapped, trying to keep from breaking out in tears of frustration and fear. "The enemy vessel is only 10,000 kilometers distant." Then as the giant warship finally emerged into temporal space, she continued, "it measures . . . 1,250 kilometers in length and has a beam of 350 kilometers." Then, checking her navigational coordinates, she affirmed, "He's aligned his course and is heading for star group UP8816U."

Bish nodded, then turned to face the gridscreen again as Miriam entered onto the bridge and stopped short in her tracks. Unbidden memories of her past experience on the Gale Robel with totally alien beings in some immense starship, flashed before her eyes. She knew intuitively that this gigantic battle wagon from Samael's far-off empire wasn't the same as she'd encountered on the Gale Robel, not even remotely similar. Still, its incredible size

and the overpowering projection of wrongness stirred deep feelings of terror in her inner mind.

The black warship was huge, and even the knowledge of its dimensions was inadequate to describe the effect it had on the crew. Everyone became silent in seconds, so only muffled breathing filled the quiet, tense bridge. The vessel took over a minute to fully emerge from the sub-binary because of its vast size. Nashramh and G.C.C. ships came out of the sub-binary so quickly that it seemed almost instantaneous, but the size of this black vessel appeared to slow the process. The effect was awesome; it looked as though it had emerged from some invisible cloud. The bow appeared first, then the midbody in gradual sections, and finally the stern.

At this close range, only 10,000 kilometers, the massive vessel, unmagnified, completely dominated the void. Magnified, it completely blotted out the stars on the gridscreen. Bish could see the monstrosity moving slowly, lumbering through space, and as it moved, she could see pinpricks of light, low protruding sections, and almost invisible antennae activity.

Bish shook her head helplessly, looking at Miriam who now stood silently behind her. How in the Eternal's galaxy could they hope to fight, much less win, against these over-powering odds?

Miriam opened her eyes from her communication with Council Central, and seeing Bish's look, squeezed her shoulder and smiled grimly. Bish whispered, "It seems so alive. . . ."

Miriam nodded. For indeed the hull of the immense, black warship was alive; only Miriam truly understood about the hideous life with which it was filled. It sent tremors of dark suspicion down her spine, and exuded an incredible sense of Wrongness as had the walls at Borgdragon and Agtren, but this seemed different. She guessed that the difference came from the fact that this vessel was created - not made or built - but created and shaped from wherever it was the black ones originated. Miriam sensed that countless living beings were murdered and their intellects infused into the building materials of this huge battlewagon; they hadn't come from this galaxy, and their alien emotions sent tremors of unspeakable terror through anyone who came close.

During the next six hours, another 199 of the huge warships appeared. They were accompanied by 16,000 various heavy, medium, and light cruisers, along with other auxiliary vessels as

escorts. Miriam realized that the really big ones were capital ships, although she couldn't guess what might be in them. All made the same course corrections, making for star group UP8816U, then dropped back into the sub-binary to continue their journey.

Miriam remained on the bridge, watching both the gridscreen and the holographic dimension images of various enemy ships, and reported everything back to Council Central. All of her information and visuals were taped by Council Central and placed into files for analysis.

Oddly enough, Jenn was a real help during the first day of these sightings. Everyone felt a strong urge to whisper and tiptoe around although it didn't really matter. Jenn felt these urges too, but remembered what Miriam told her and she was determined to cheer everyone else up although she too was terrified. After all, there was nothing anyone could do about the black ones, was there? So why let it bother them?

So she took time off from her console and set the signal computer on automatic so it would pick up and record all incoming data. Then she made rounds of the Whisper, bringing tea and munchies to everyone to cheer them up.

A disturbed Bish looked up at the slight figure standing next to her with a precariously balanced tray of beverages and munchies. It was Jenn, who looked peaked but smiled brightly as she could. Bish smiled grimly back, musing that it was probably a blessing to be as innocent as this child who was trying so wholeheartedly to cheer everybody up. Bish didn't feel the slightest bit hungry - in fact, she still felt shaky and a bit ill - but she figured she'd better have something to eat anyway.

Jenn looked down at the tired-looking captain, hoping that she'd never have to worry as much as Bish did. Bish took a mug of spiced tea and some sweet nuts, and Jenn passed on. At first her attempts on the bridge didn't help much, but as the hours went by the tension lightened. Miriam would look up occasionally from her observations or emerge from her reflections to Council Central, and wink at her.

Reports from other deep probes indicated that another 400 immense enemy battle groups of the same description had appeared in their patrol areas and had dropped back into the sub-binary again. All were making for the same destination.

Thankfully, none of the cloaked spy vessels were discovered, as had been feared when the big enemy warships came close to them.

Every day for the next month, large numbers of enemy ships continued to arrive, and by the first day of TALUM, 6692-7N5, more than 8,000,000 enemy warships began their seven-month journey to star group UP8816U. G.C.C. Admiralty determined by the second week of TALUM, that this was, must be, the main thrust of the enemy's attack, and ordered its entire mainline fleet, 10,000,000 war-ships of all classes, into the battle zone. Now all Sargon's hell was going to break loose.

G.C.C. Admiralty kept only 2,000,000 fighting ships in reserve, which was cutting it pretty close if the enemy were to break through the main line. But after all, if the enemy did break through and destroy the main line, those 2,000,000 paltry ships wouldn't be able to do much.

The crew of the Whisper, as well as those on all the other Nashramh and Ansharim deep probe scout vessels continued to observe and report enemy ship movements on a round-the-clock basis, missing none of the thousands of giant warships that passed through their sectors like an immense army of black ants on their relentless march to war and death.

Chapter 19

Invasion

Never underestimate the resolve or bravery or our G.C.C. allies . . . nor the strength of their leadership throughout this crisis. All leaders make mistakes, but in this terrible battle, our allies pulled together, put aside their reservations and selflessly pursued the enemy. . . .

18:16-05 SHIKIM 6192-7N5

Ever since first contact with the enemy, made by the Constance and her four escorts back in DEMIN 6188-7N5, the G.C.C. navy fought a continuous battle along the outer rim against squadrons of probing light and medium-sized enemy cruisers. The G.C.C. combined fleets lost more than 1,000,000 warships of all classes during the first 38 months. Now reports from the Nashramh claimed a fleet of more than 8,000,000 enemy warships was approaching star group UP8816U and would arrive there within several months. Preparations became frenzied, for the battle was now at hand.

Admiralty analysts still had no idea how the Nashramh obtained their early warning information, but past experience demonstrated that it was absolutely accurate. Therefore, analysts accepted it as true, and preparations made accordingly.

There were those in authority, though, who still feared the sisterhood witches might supply them with wrong information. The enemy's actual numbers and destination, they suspected, might be different. Vivid memories of what happened to the turncoat officers several months earlier squelched any negative actions. Now Admiralty was faced with either trusting the sisterhood whose

mysterious methods were questionable at best, or retrenching again and possibly suffering far greater losses.

The Admiralty wisely decided to accept the information as correct. During this delicate moment at the beginning of the invasion's main thrust, the destruction of any remaining leadership would surely send them directly into the grip of Belial. Now was the time to test their ability to deal with the black enemy in force, and there was no time left to consider other such perils.

At the center of the G.C.C. XIXth Fleet's mid-right flank, the heavy cruiser 'Winsome' led a wedge formation, accompanied by her escort of four light cruisers. G.C.C. Admiralty elected to use the wedge formation for small battle groups, with four wedges to a flotilla, and five flotillas to a squadron. If their estimates were correct, each G.C.C. mainline fleet had adequate numbers of attack vessels to allot one squadron of 100 vessels per enemy cruiser for each incoming wave. In this way, the squadron could split up into flotillas for summary contact.

Each of the five flotillas would attack separately: one to the enemy's port, one to starboard, one aft, one from below, and one from above. To attack the bow section of enemy ships was useless, since this housed the bulk of their firepower and was heavily shielded. Instead, the most favored point of attack was to be aft of amidships. This is where the G.C.C. had inflicted the most damage during early skirmishes. Admiralty analysts also surmised, this was where the enemy's main power sections and magazines were. Any major disruption of these sections might cause secondary detonations and trigger the enemy's deadman mechanism. This was suicidal but necessary.

At the mid-right flank of XIXth Fleet Wing, Admiralty had more than 100,000 warships. The primary wing consisted of 10 centuries of 1,000 ships, divided into five battle groups of 200 ships, or ten squadrons of 100 ships. Five fleet wings made up a full fleet, and 20 fleets, or 10,000,000 vessels, made up most of the combined navies. There were 36 sub-fleets, each consisting of varying numbers of ships.

While Admiralty took responsibility for the overall conduct of combined operations and strategic planning, each fleet command delegated tactical and area decisions to lower echelon officers at each wing, century, group, squadron, flotilla, and wedge level. In the last analysis, the main thrust of frontline combat and tactical

battle decisions, depended almost entirely on the wedge battle group. Since the enemy force could appear out of the sub-binary at any location without warning, it would break into the midst of the G.C.C. squadrons. The small wedge battle formation, although outgunned by enemy warships, had the advantage of maneuverability and close-coordinated tactics. Usually each wedge battle group consisted of one heavy lead cruiser, and four medium and light-cruisers or destroyers.

The battle formations were broken into smaller segments than the wedge. Aboard each warship one fighter-lifeboat sufficed for each 500 crew members, and 15 smaller fighters assigned to commando operations. These fighter craft, with five specially trained personnel, were to be released immediately upon contact with the enemy and to act as a screen around their motherships. This, analysts hoped, would confuse the enemy's fire control long enough for the larger ships to close into ramming range.

Senior-Captain Klouvid Vistre of the Winsome sat staring intently at the large gridscreen stretching across the bridge. He was nervous and could feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing straight up. Minutes before, his gridscanning officer picked up signals of a massive disturbance in the sub-binary, and he expected the enemy to emerge at any time.

He shook his head to himself; despite the numerous briefings he'd sat through for the past few months, and the overviews on wedge tactics and strategies, there was just no way to prepare in advance for an actual engagement with the enemy. This wasn't the same as a normal fleet action, where one knew the disposition of the enemy and his actual battle order. Out here in the three-dimensional arena of open space, all sorts of tactics could be used against enemy squadrons using conventional weapons, such as lasers, torpedoes, and thermal mines.

However, this enemy didn't use conventional weapons, nor were his tactics well-understood. He appeared out of the sub-binary in his massive black ships to demolish you with weapons that didn't even register on your defensive screens or sensing equipment. The only thing you could do was jump to the attack as soon as he came into sight and make for his aft midsection. Without time to analyze his disposition or to consider a unique battle plan, the wedges had to fly into the fray immediately or not at all. Each captain of each wedge had to concern himself solely with whatever conditions

confronted his command alone. And with each wedge, it would be a whole new game.

Vistre stiffened even as the gridscanning officer gasped in surprise. An enemy cruiser, three times the size of the Winsome, appeared 10,000 kilometers off port-bow. He barked out orders and the wedge began to alter its course along with the rest of his flotilla. They had the enemy at a disadvantage with the element of surprise - at least they hoped they did - and they weren't going to give him time to raise his shields and go on the offensive.

Captain Vistre's wedge made for the upper section of the enemy cruiser, which seemed so black and sleek that it was utterly alien to his senses. Moving at flank speed, the five attacking warships remained in tight formation until they were 100 kilometers from the huge black cruiser. Each released several thousand thermal mines in a wide pattern and fired torpedo canisters at regular intervals. Their fighter-lifeboats disengaged shortly before and were fanning out ahead of the larger vessels. A brilliant explosion flashed somewhere to the Winsome's port side. "We've lost the Elcrodé," the scanning officer reported in a pale voice.

As the first moments of the battle began, G.C.C. vessels shot straight for the immense enemy like a swarm of darts, and it appeared the surprise attack would be effective. Only too soon did many of the enemy ships raise their shields, firing fierce salvos from their strange weapons and, destroying everything that came in their path. However, the initial damage had been inflicted; the disoriented enemy squadrons couldn't gather into battle formation, lessening his effectiveness.

Admiral Meirer Afrak, commanding the XIXth, XVIth, and XXXIst battle fleets, stood alongside Captain Stattor Caldoon, of the flagship H.C. Hammer, watching the gridscreen intently. Staff and liaison personnel were moving around them, compiling and updating battle reports and situation statistics as fast as they arrived. Twenty minutes earlier, first contact found more than 200,000 G.C.C. warships in the midst of the enemy fleet's leading elements as they broke into temporal space.

Afrak pointed out a strange movement on the gridscreen and frowned. The G.C.C. fleets seemed like a bunch of small toys in the midst of a huge fleet of giant ships. Even he, with his years of combat experience and strategic planning, felt a moment of terror and fear that the enemy would squash his fleet as easily as an

insect. Then his apprehension passed, his complete self-discipline covering it and allowing him to work almost mechanically. He, of all people, had to keep a cool head and find the right formula to defeat this awesome enemy. There was no room for error and too much depended upon the accuracy of his judgment.

Afrak's flagship, the H.C. Hammer, was positioned with his central fleet reserves, 2,000,000,000 kilometers from the point of initial contact. Despite the short distance, his flagship, one of the combined fleet's most important vessels, was well-protected. Like all other flagships, the H.C. Hammer was escorted by a screen of seven heavy-cruisers in cyclic formation. An in-depth screen of medium and light-cruisers surrounded his inner core of heavy-cruisers, and a wider screen of destroyers patrolled beyond this perimeter. Behind this array, auxiliary vessels were situated safely. These were supply, fuel, munitions and repair ships of all types. All presently engaged warships had a maximum consignment of munitions and fuel, but in this war, anything was possible, even the prospect of resupplying frontline vessels that survived combat engagements.

Captain Caldoon said something he didn't quite catch; damn, that wasn't good. Afrak shook himself out of his thoughts. "Repeat that, Stattor."

"We've killed 12,208 of their cruisers and taken 38,503 casualties. . . ."

Afrak nodded. That was consistent with all recent skirmishes with the enemy since the G.C.C. had been receiving early warning information on enemy movements. G.C.C. losses were always high, but the enemy was losing far more than previously . . . although not enough. Afrak had to find a better way. His tactics presently in use were sound; in fact, they were excellent, sure winners - against anyone but Belial's huge battle cruisers. All his careful planning and studies were useless, since he didn't know how to compensate for the enemy weapons.

He briefly considered whether to reinforce his frontline vessels or to wait for the situation to firm up. He decided to wait. He was in a good position for rapid deployment of his reserves into hard-pressed areas, but that was kept for a last resort. Now it was time to wait patiently and see what developed.

As battle reports poured in, it became obvious the enemy fleet was caught by surprise and the majority of its lead elements,

estimates now numbering 80,000-plus vessels, had been destroyed within 35 minutes after they'd broken into temporal space. G.C.C. losses now numbered 106,206 with 43,952 sustaining heavy damage. Not quite a 2-1 kill ratio. This was outstanding! Afrak had expected to lose anywhere from 30 to 50 of his own ships to each of the enemy's; this was normal from past experience. Maybe there was hope. One thing he knew for sure - those brave and dedicated people out there were giving their all for their loved ones and their galaxy, and by god they were succeeding!

Afrak strode over to the window of the holographic arena, which occupied an entire room aboard every flag-ship. It measured 8,000 cubic meters and showed a three dimensional holographic layout of the immediate battle zone. The reserve fleet had to stay out of visual range from the battle zone to be safe from an untimely attack. Thus, huge magnification gridscreens and holographic battle simulations gave commanding officers an estimate of what was happening.

The mammoth enemy cruisers were all initially out-lined in red and the G.C.C. in green to easily identify both sides. Vivid blue showed the complete destruction of ships on either side, with varying degrees of blue showing levels of battle damage. Now the holographic arena looked like a veritable graveyard of dead ships, and Afrak unconsciously cringed. Most of the red enemy vessels were now outlined in a vivid blue, showing the massive destruction the enemy fleet's leading elements suffered. A large number of G.C.C. vessels were dead and many showed green with tinges of blue for battle damage. At various intervals, Afrak saw a flash indicating a ship was hit and sustained damage. None of the enemy ships were undamaged.

Afrak frowned and studied the battle zone as displayed in the holographic arena. Certainly the enemy, who considered himself to be absolutely superior, hadn't expected this kind of surprise attack from mere savages. Now he'd learned from his mistake and alerted the remainder of the incoming fleet. The next wave should be arriving in several hours, so the wing could shift to another position to sustain an element of surprise. There was time to withdraw critically wounded vessels and replace them from his reserves while they were repaired in round-the-clock refitting stations and supplied with replacement crews. He issued immediate orders for

contingency plan 'C', so his forces would be ready for the next wave of enemy warships.

Afrak sighed; there was so much to be done and so little time to do it. The element of complete surprise had worked beyond expectations, but any further surprises couldn't be totally unexpected. What would happen when the main body of the black fleet arrived? Most likely it would be a slaughter of the G.C.C.

By the end of the 13th day of battle, the enemy fleet was effectively scattered, and now only widely separated clashes were being reported. After their initial surprise and heavy losses, the enemy changed his battle tactics and broke into temporal space with all shields up and firing huge salvos of high-energy bursts into the waiting G.C.C. ships. Now both sides were sustaining very heavy losses on initial contact. The only real advantage the G.C.C. ships had was during the first three minutes after the enemy ships entered temporal space. The focal adjustment for their fire control sensors appeared to be disrupted by the surges in their activated shields as they broke out of the sub-binary, requiring them to fire blindly. The G.C.C. ships took this opportunity to attack before the enemy's fire control could be rectified. The G.C.C.'s losses compared to the enemy's, was now about 12-1, still considerably below Admiralty estimates. How long this could last was anyone's guess. If the enemy succeeded in forming battle groups, he would be almost unbeatable. This had to be prevented at all costs.

The enemy formed into battle groups of seven vessels in concave formations, which at a moment's notice were able to envelope each flotilla sent against them. Admiralty had given up the plan of sending one squadron against each enemy cruiser. There weren't enough G.C.C. vessels to accommodate the plan as each new wave of enemy ships continued to arrive. All the Admiralty could count on was the skill of each vessel's helm to distract the enemy gunners, and a little-used tactic discovered almost by accident. Apparently the enemy's cruisers, when heavily engaged with a squadron or the smaller wedge formation, lost control of their close maneuvers. Occasionally, he would brush too close to one of his own warships, thus colliding or disrupting both ships' defensive shields. The only other truly effective tactic was to boldly ram the enemy vessel in a suicide attack. This tactic appeared to be used more frequently as the fighting became

increasingly desperate, and both fresh and wounded ships rammed themselves straight into the superior enemy.

G.C.C. Admiralty had a difficult choice to make, as the war dragged brutally on into its third week. One, the combined fleets could continue to greet the incoming enemy cruisers and be systematically destroyed in a war of attrition, and thus lose the battle. Or two, they could wait on the opposite sides of various suns and giant planets until after the enemy entered the temporal and stopped firing massive salvos at random. This alternative plan's major downfall was, it allowed the enemy to form into battle groups before the combined fleets could surprise them with an all-out attack. The G.C.C.'s fleets were caught between a rock and a hard place, and they knew it.

Admiral Afrak found it necessary to commit another million vessels to the mainline of resistance just to offset the enemy's advantages, but this left his small reserve depleted. Also, there was no way to discover the enemy's source or type of weaponry, which left the combined fleets in a rut they could not escape.

Now, despite all of their heavy losses during these first waves of Josargon's fleets, the G.C.C. naval armadas still faced his main invasion forces. According to Nashramh reports last Elim, a major force containing 8,000,000 vessels, with what appeared to be fantastically large flagships was on its way. The estimated time of arrival was the 28th day of SHABIN, 6192-7N5, 13 days from now.

The Admiralty had to discover a way to face these massive capital ships. If the combined fleets continued losing increasingly greater numbers of ships to the enemy's probing fleets, how could they hope to stop this huge armada of battle cruisers and seemingly invulnerable flagships?

Afrak met with the other combined fleet admirals and concluded that they were totally outmatched by this new enemy force. Their own largest naval vessels were only 180 kilometers long, and these were flagships used for command and control. Therefore, strategic and tactical revisions had to be made to blunt the enemy's main thrust.

The G.C.C. would assemble cargo and auxiliary ships, and use them as torpedoes. They would clear the way for the warships to follow into their suicide runs against the enemy's capital ships. Their only hope was that the civilian vessels could occupy the enemy cruiser screens, while the naval vessels made for the

battlewagons. If the wedges could detonate their sub-binary drives either near or against the giant ships, possibly the massive shock wave they generated would set off the enemy's deadman mechanisms. There really wasn't a better alternative; no matter which form of attack they used, the naval ships still faced suicide. The wedge groups were now to totally disregard all enemy vessels and make directly for the immense capital ships.

None of the Admiralty authorities particularly liked the idea of suicide runs against the enemy, but oddly enough, various captains and crews throughout the combined fleets favored it. With this in mind, G.C.C. Admiralty made the decision.

Another decision, made years earlier, now also entered its final stages. Use of land forces was deemed absolutely necessary. Because the extended battle was within range of hundreds of small planetoids, they became auxiliary fire bases. Each of these small planets was equipped with special battle sites which were quickly erected and armed with high-velocity naval torpedo launchers and high-gain laser batteries. These ground forces could focus large numbers of giant Mark XXI-B torpedoes into enemy ship concentrations as diversions and disrupters.

The high-gain laser batteries served for both defense and for disrupting enemy instrumentation. It had long since become obvious that the enemy shields were impervious to lasers. But, for some unknown reason, they dissipated in the shield's energy matrix in a manner that disrupted enemy fire-control instruments, making them vulnerable to penetration by attacking G.C.C. warships. It was a far-reaching tactic, but anything useful was considered worthwhile.

These stations were held in reserve until the main body of the enemy's fleet arrived, for there was no time or way to shield them from attack. Once discovered, they were vulnerable, but in a major action, they could add much needed firepower support to the over-pressed navy.

The ground-support forces were commanded by Senior-General Hans Brufek, a dedicated and energetic man who'd participated in dozens of desperate missions and made it through them all. For more than 100 years, he had painstakingly prepared for this invasion in more ways than one. Hundreds of thousands of special land forces and pathfinder teams were trained for, and participated in raids on enemy outposts and garrisons. In addition, Brufek

developed and trained protective forces for the G.C.C.'s own vulnerable outposts. Hans was directly responsible for this early training system, even as he'd fathered the idea of the planetary fire bases which could be moved out onto the rim at short notice.

It was his opinion that the invasion was as much a land war as a naval one, if not more so. After all, it was in fact the planetary systems, with their primitive populations, that were under attack by the enemy, not just a lifeless stretch of the void where the G.C.C. combined navies lined up to make their last stand.

As he briefed his assembled officer corps, Hans made an imposing figure, with his weather-beaten face and long-latticed scar reaching from the edge of his left ear to his throat. He was one of those few leaders who seemed impervious to whatever conditions war placed upon him, and his uncanny ability to remain constant when all else went to hell was respected by all.

Clad only in the grey-green uniform of a pathfinder field officer, he spoke in his rumbling voice with a clear logic which had, over the past centuries, moved millions to follow his lead and respect his judgment.

"Not only are the combined fleets vitally important to the defense of our galaxy, but so are our land forces. The navies are responsible for defending the void between our star systems, but it's our training and skill that will secure and hold their hostile worlds under our feet. It's here, on the ground, that Adam Belial seeks to rule, and it's from this very soil that we will create the means by which he will be denied victory. We will disrupt his communications, his vital industries, defeat his filthy legions of black butchers, and strike out against his invading fleets. It will be our skill and determination which will ultimately turn the tide of battle, for without our full and concerted support here on the ground, the sacrifices of our loyal brothers and sisters out in the void will be in vain!"

The assembled officers considered his words as he continued to speak, carefully outlining the salient factors governing their participation in the upcoming defense of the outer rim and of their mission to establish fire bases in the battle zone. Each man and woman knew they had an important role to play, and each was determined to follow through to the end.

Chapter 20

Battle

War is a period of compressed violence wherein nothing is actually as it originally appears and people are caught in another dimension . . . for no matter how well planned, war has a will of its own . . . and both justice and injustice prevail at the same time.

26:00-28 SHABIN 6192-7N5

Bright flashes lit-up the star-speckled void, illuminating the expansive gridscreen as Captain Wendum Scoon brought the lead destroyer, Lisboor, into attack position at the trailing edge of what was left of his scissors wedge formation. His only remaining escort was the 'Harrip', which had sustained heavy damage on her port aft reactor decks. His flotilla was one of the many which employed the extensive use of destroyers, previously used as screen patrols. His other three escorts and his four co-wedges were now gone, having been blown to atoms by enemy cruisers without inflicting any damage to the enemy.

He sighed, passing his hand over his brow in consternation. It seemed as though their ships were getting nowhere. Increasing numbers of enemy elements appeared out of the sub-binary at continuous intervals, firing their weapons for all they were worth. Three destroyers from Scoon's own wedge were destroyed outright. The wedges which had joined together were traveling in a diamond formation. Circumstances forced them to deviate from their planned attack and they'd come about to confront the enemy cruiser. Scoon planned to detach four escort vessels to deal with

other incoming enemy ships and to attack the first heavy cruiser with the remaining six.

His plan was smashed before it had been consummated, when they were forced to engage more than a dozen enemy ships. Their torpedo canisters and lasers failed to penetrate the enemy's shields and the G.C.C. destroyers were cut to pieces by unseen weapons. Now only the Lisboor, his own command ship, and the Harrip remained. There were no other operational ships within 10,000 kilometers, for the G.C.C. fleet was spread thin from heavy losses.

Captain Scoon had received new orders from Fleet Admiralty instructing him to ignore all enemy cruisers and other warships, and to evade them whenever possible. He and his command were to concentrate on the enemy battleships about to arrive from the sub-binary at any moment.

In the distance, Scoon could see an enemy cruiser lumbering along at an oddly slow pace. He was about to order evasive action when a brilliant flash erupted where the advancing cruiser had been. Tense, he watched as four more huge vessels headed his way, just inside visual range; he was so stiff with tension that when his communications officer spoke, he nearly jumped. Life out here was hell. Scoon didn't know when his beautiful ship, the Lisboor, was going to get it, but he knew she would. Only his rigid self-discipline kept him mechanically acting out his command. He was totally exhausted and scared; in fact he was terrified. He didn't want to die out here in the lonely void.

"Captain," she said precisely. "Senior-Captain Rolf reports new orders from Admiralty directing us to join with the remainder of the flotilla at station 26 Delta."

He nodded. Good. There were some ships left in the squadron, and they'd hopefully have time to regroup.

Within two hours, the 40 remaining ships of Rolf's squadron regrouped. Scoon now commanded a new wedge with three other destroyers in addition to the Lisboor and the Harrip. Now he was in a scissor wedge formation again, at the trailing hinge. He discovered that the scissor wedge was more effective than the leading wedge, since it provided him with greater room for maneuver and regrouping.

Ahead and to port, Scoon could see varying wedge formations about 200,000 kilometers away. If intelligence reports were correct, it wouldn't be long now. The real question was whether or not his

ship and the rag-tag elements of his own squadron, along with whomever was still alive out in the void beyond visual range, would have any effect on the incoming enemy battlewagons.

Scoon shifted in his command chair, his stiff back sore. God! It seemed he hadn't slept for days!

Everyone on the bridge stiffened. The main compu-grid revealed fluctuating readings signaling major disruptions from the sub-binary. This signal was far more intense than any before, suggesting a much greater disturbance was being generated in the sub-binary and its transitional plasma flows.

Scoon shifted in his seat again, tense and wary. So far, he had no reports from Admiralty about the arrival of the enemy's main fleet, and he wondered if here, at the mid-left flank, he was to be the first to experience it. Well, now it seemed he'd soon find out.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a gigantic form began to slide into temporal space, creating an overwhelming calm borne from some alien fear that permeated every G.C.C. vessel within visual range.

Scoon sat bolt upright as the enemy battleship broke into temporal space no more than 10,000 kilometers away, 5,000 kilometers from his co-wedge leader, the 'Job'. It reminded him of some huge spaceborne worm. His mouth dropped open in disbelief.

"Do you see that, Neftalak?" he gasped to his navigator. "By the Eternal, it's . . ."

Ahead of the Lisboor, displayed on the gridscreen, the Job and her wedge made directly for the giant beast-like vessel, firing everything they had.

The capital ship, he knew from intelligence reports, was escorted by 50 cruisers, surrounding it in a circular screen. So far, only nine of the escorts showed on the computer's primary grid.

Scoon shook himself after seconds and barked orders to the helm, which were transmitted immediately to the rest of his wedge. They quickly fell in behind his co-wedge, so the formation became diamond-shaped, with the Lisboor taking the trailing hinge. The rest of his squadron was pursuing the same action somewhere around him, but he was only concerned with his own attack.

As the mammoth enemy battleship continued to slide into view, Scoon saw distant explosions. Ahead he saw the Job's wedge break off and make for starboard. His own wedge, continued straight ahead to divert the enemy's fire control.

An enemy cruiser broke into temporal space to the Lisboor's starboard side, firing salvos from his unknown weapons in every direction. The Harrip exploded immediately, and the Lisboor shook from a direct hit just forward of her bridge. Everything went black as the ship nearly jarred to a stop. Secondary explosions detonated throughout the wounded ship and bright flashes lit up the bridge as shards of screaming metal spun and ricocheted through the large space.

Neftalak shook his head, trying to find the deck; his arm throbbed terribly, and he thought he'd get that bastard Crougs, who hated elves and called him a pansy. That craphead Crougs would get his, every last bit. Then the memory of the explosion hit him, he suddenly remembered that this wasn't one of his childhood fights, where he'd broken his arm, but the bridge of the Lisboor.

"I've got to straighten my head out. God! What in Sargon's hell hit us?"

Everything went black again, then lightened to a dull, throbbing red. He dimly smelled something burning.

He heard someone shriek, then, smelled burning flesh as a bright flash from one of the consoles lit the bridge for an instant. Then all went black. The smell of charred flesh, with a dimly sweet undertone, wafted over him in waves, and dimly he realized that the woman at the helm had tried to get power when her console shorted, electrocuting her instantly.

Within seconds that seemed an eternity, the red chem-lights blinked on dimly, flickered off, and came back on more weakly. They remained operational.

Neftalak could only see a couple of meters through the thick haze created by the red chem-lights and the smoke from shorted consoles. God his arm hurt!

Neftalak struggled haltingly to his feet, dimly seeing sprawled shapes strewn around him, and swayed unsteadily. Captain Scoon sat dead in his command chair, looking very tired, with a large hole torn in his chest from some unknown projectile.

Neftalak shook his head again to clear it, then, quickly probed himself as his senses cleared. This was nothing like the training simulators . . . oh, hell!

His right arm was broken, and the elbow jutted out at an unnatural angle and hurt like hell. Yes, that's right, The Elbow, not my elbow . . . let's be calm and collected. . . .

His face felt odd. So that was the charred flesh he smelled. His environmental protective uniform and face gear saved him from being burned alive. He was badly wounded, although he didn't know how badly. Somehow he could still function, and he staggered to the comm-panel on the right arm of the dead Captain's command chair. He grabbed the emergency comm-link from its mounting case with bold red letters stating: 'EMERGENCY'. He spoke, he thought, quickly and precisely.

"Helm, are you alive?"

The answer came immediately, "Emergency aft helm, section-one, still functioning bridge."

Neftalak glanced at the miraculously intact gridscreen, seeing bright blue-green expanding clouds he knew came from the exploding escorts of his wedge. Instinctively he knew that only seconds had passed.

"Make full flank speed toward the big one, and disregard all other targets," he ordered. "All forward torpedo sections and mine sections release all; I repeat all, ordnance in a two-degree spread directly ahead. Laser batteries, fire per schedule four, and fighters' one through 12, if you're alive, eject now!"

He dimly heard affirmations from the Lisboor's six remaining weapons sections, two from fighter-lifeboats, and the lead destroyer shot forward. Weak from loss of blood, he slid to a slumped position with his back resting against Scoon's chair, still clasping his comm-link. Neftalak watched the gridscreen as his ship moved towards the immense capital ship, which was under attack by two other ship's from the Job's wedge. One of the vessels exploded in a blinding flash while the Job, which was far ahead of her, suddenly stopped in space, as if hitting a solid wall.

Neftalak watched, amazed, as the Job exploded, with no sign that she'd actually hit anything or if something hit her. Then he knew; the enemy shield!

The gridscreen in front of him showed only expanding bright blue-green clouds that had once been the Job and her sister-ship. An odd quivering in the place where the Job had just struck the enemy's shield caught Neftalak's eye. Could the shield have been

disrupted by exploding sub-binaries? Had the Job inadvertently found the secret for penetrating the enemy's impregnable shields?

Somewhere on the smoky red bridge, the organic computer continued to read off the casualty reports and play out a distorted hologram of the immediate battle area. Another console blew, sending out bright sparks and dark black smoke as Neftalak tried desperately to discern what was happening to the enemy's shield. He coughed hoarsely as the smoke bypassed his burned atmospheric rectifier and his eyes began to water.

Struggling to make his voice clear, Neftalak spoke carefully into the comm-link. "Helm, make directly for the Job's wreckage, and drive straight through!"

He heard no response from the comm-link, but as he focused on the gridscreen, he could see the Lisboor alter her heading and make directly for the expanding cloud of debris that had once been the sleek heavy-cruiser, Job.

Within 60 seconds, it was all over for the Lisboor as she shot through the deadly cloud of debris, and into the side of the huge black battleship. Neftalak watched the entire galaxy come to pieces before his watering eyes as the gridscreen slowly darkened and sputtered. Suddenly he felt lonely and empty.

Just before his tired and wounded body felt the final impact of sudden death, Neftalak momentarily saw the faces of Telakin, Myrnah, and of his only love - Jenn.

The dead Lisboor tore through 30 kilometers of the enemy battleship's inner decks and plates before her sub-binary drives detonated from the impact, tearing a giant 50-kilometer hole in the giant flagship.

The mammoth vessel completed its transition into temporal space, continued moving for another 40 seconds. Then, with a blinding detonation, caused by the enemy's deadman triggering mechanism, it exploded, imploded, and exploded again. No one was able to wonder at the beauty of such terrible and awesome destruction, for the disruptive forces unleashed by the detonation caused a chain reaction, destroying 43 of the ship's 50 escort cruisers and leaving the remaining seven severely damaged from high-energy particles which shot through them, killing huge numbers of their crews. Within an hour, six of the remaining heavy-cruisers also exploded into bright clouds of sub-atomic particles. Then there was nothing.

The G.C.C. heavy-cruiser 'Crestwel' made her way with her squadron of 20 warships toward the Job's operational grid. Their long-range scanners were trained on the Job's and Lisboor's grid coordinates and picked up the clear signal from the lead destroyer's open emergency communications channel. Captain-Navigator Neftalak B'Mesziah's final orders had been intercepted on the sub-link channel, disclosing how the enemy battleship was taken.

Data describing this new strategy was broadcast throughout the G.C.C.'s combined fleets in ultra top-secret codes over their special sub-binary frequencies, and was immediately implemented with limited success, but with success all the same.

Out of 80,000 of the mammoth enemy capital ships entering the battle zone in the first wave, 14,000 were destroyed in the same manner, along with another 70,000 of their heavy escort cruisers. All were destroyed by both primary and secondary explosions. Another 19,000 flag-ships were severely damaged and put out of commission by the exploding G.C.C. suicide ships that breached their protective screens and plunged into their huge hulls.

Because the G.C.C. had only a limited number of auxiliary craft to act as torpedoes, Admiralty altered this tactic as well. Reserve forces of civilian vessels, taken by force from outlying enemy installations, were on their way under the command of G.C.C. prize crews. But, until these ships, which numbered in excess of 1,000,000, arrived, something had to be done to increase the rapidly decreasing force of on-line torpedo vessels.

The Admiralty decided to actively use of both Class II and III fighter-lifeboats attached to each naval vessel, since each ship carried an average of four of each. The 450 meter-long Class II fighters had a crew of seven, while the 750 meter-long Class III fighters had a crew of five. Instead of providing fighter screens, these small vessels would be loaded with 200 thermal mines, activated by a single detonator, and would serve as manned torpedoes operating in mini-wedges of five for basic maneuvers. Their main targets would be enemy cruisers and auxiliary craft, especially anything that appeared to be wounded or otherwise incapacitated. In some cases, they would operate against the battleships whenever circumstances dictated. These vessels had a surprising effect on the enemy's warships and were responsible for

a large number of kills. Once released from their mother ships, the operating range was limited, so they attacked anything that came close to them. Their small size added to their success in closing with the enemy without encountering heavy resistance. This occurred in most part because the huge enemy vessels disregarded them as being mere reconnaissance craft before learning of their real intention.

* * *

Sister-Captain Yanna Jun wiped her brow and sighed heavily, tired. At 570, she was amazingly resourceful and well-fit, able to outfight and outmaneuver any of her junior officers. She was one of the few Sisters-Magum assigned to back area operations in enemy controlled star systems. Her command of 72 Nashramh scout-freighters was assigned responsibility for disrupting and destroying enemy communications and supply systems in this zone. During the fierce raids her ships engaged in, the enemy lost more than 900 cargo ships captured and 43 warships destroyed. The small force destroyed 169 communications and industrial bases and liberated two prison worlds. They succeeded mostly because enemy intelligence was unaware of their presence until too late. The enemy wasn't prepared for the sheer ferocity and daring of their attacks.

Yanna's flagship was the Class II Scout Freighter 'SF Jennifer Ren-Zee', one of the older sisterhood vessels still in active service. Three of her six original escort ships were operational. One was badly crippled and withdrawn for repair and two were destroyed by enemy fire. Now only 21 ships of her small fleet remained in action and Yanna now considered her next moves. Council Central informed her that her losses were average for Nashramh operations in other enemy-controlled areas, although her successes were 30 percent higher than the other battle groups. This was of small consolation to her, since any losses were too many. She hated this damned war and felt old and tired. All of her parts felt the terrible losses experienced by other Magums and their sisters.

The Jennifer Ren and her three escorts entered star system UP8845U, and were to be joined by four other vessels within the next five hours. Her target was a medium size Group-D2 inner world, which served as an enemy communications relay beacon.

Yanna's four warships had just broken into temporal space ten minutes earlier, and their scanners detected only two cargo ships lying in low orbit around the far-off world. They sensed nothing out of order and the enemy's signal transmissions indicated that their entry into the planetary system was unobserved. The warships were placed on general quarters before emerging into temporal space and no chances were being taken. Yanna's plan was to lie in outer orbit until the rest of her force arrived before making her attack. She wanted both the number of attack vessels and the element of surprise on her side. Until then, she would lie quietly and observe enemy actions and plan her attack.

Yanna sat next to Sister Yuffin Lydel, the vessel's CIC officer, and studied all the intelligence data they had on the target world. It was listed as 'Feraloum', on the register of names and a primitive humanoid race populated it. They had welcomed Sweet Sargon's Legions of Light and now worked in his loyal service.

Sister Yuffin pointed out the known defenses on the planet and in the surrounding area. "Our actions have already reduced the enemy's local fleet out in Zone A-61, 200 light years distant. The Feraloum Fleet was engaged in raiding G.C.C. outposts, and we surprised them. They lost nine warships to us and 16 to G.C.C. cover fire. The remaining 35 scattered and run from the area, and we're hunting down." Yuffin checked her register and continued.

"From all appearances, we can close to within 4,000,000 kilometers of the target if we come in from between them and their sun. Here, let me show you how their beacon is oriented," Yuffin spoke precisely, reaching for a recording crystal. "This beacon has an extremely powerful transmission frequency that drowns out many signals and disrupts others. This, coupled with the radio noise emitted by their sun will serve to. . . ."

A loud sizzling noise surged through the ship as the shield generators raced out of sequence. Yanna gasped, "My God, a wave scrambler . . . a mine!" She was cut off as the stern of her scout freighter tore open, hit by the exploding mine which detonated inside the punctured shield. Atmospheric gases shot out of the torn hull and secondary eruptions rocked the 15-kilometer-long ship as volatile fuel containers detonated.

Sister-Lieutenant Nobin Almot was at her 'Deadman' station for 20 minutes waiting for further instructions. She'd removed the handle restraining pin and inserted it into the backup detonator

circuit mechanism to arm both systems. Suddenly the ship lurched, nearly tearing her out of her seat straps. Desperately, Nobin clutched at the spring-loaded handle with both hands as her ship lurched and buckled under the force of further explosions. Without warning Nobin found her self torn loose from her seat straps and jammed up against the overhead. Her hands were wrenched free of the terrible red handle! "Oh my God!" she screamed as she impacted against the overhead and heard the handle mechanism activate. SNAP! PING!

The void lit up with the brilliant flashes of detonating mines and the sub-binary explosion-implosion-explosion that signaled the death of the Jennifer Ren. The three escort scout freighters were torn by explosions as they attempted to escape the swarm of deadly mines. One after the other, each vessel succumbed and left only expanding blue-green clouds of charged particles to show that they had ever existed. Council Central heard Yanna Jun's last words and warned the incoming ships which altered their courses. Shortly thereafter, the four remaining Nashramh scout-freighters destroyed the enemy beacon and wreaked havoc over the surrounding industries of Feraloum.

There was no rejoicing at the success of their raid. Each crew member knew the terrible price paid for this enemy communications beacon. They were instructed to leave the area immediately and not risk more losses to the deadly mines. They would all pay their dues in the days to come, and this invasion of Adam Belial's black legions would always remain in their minds as the cataclysm without victory.

* * *

The fighter-lifeboat 'LB-1 Narcissus', came slowly to life in her docking bay aboard the light-cruiser 'Merrip'. The Narcissus and her sister fighters continued disembarking from the Merrip to regroup with the wedge fighters from three other G.C.C. cruisers and two destroyers. Another destroyer, the 'Croner', had just been blown to atoms somewhere off aft starboard by an enemy cruiser which had emerged from the sub-binary.

Junior-Lieutenant Merrill Eber, piloting the LB-1 Narcissus, shifted uneasily in his command chair and checked his bridge technicians. All were non-commissioned officers. The other crew members were in place at their battle stations, ready to disembark.

Moments before, a capital ship from the enemy's second incoming wave began to emerge from the sub-binary, which was his cue to begin his ejection sequence. Now, in a few seconds, he would feel the unfamiliar thrust of acceleration as it pushed him deep into his seat. He was nervous, for this was his first command. His first command would end shortly as he smashed his fighter against the enemy's shield screen.

Well, that's why he was here. Unfortunately, the fighters had to wait for visual contact with the enemy before leaving their motherships, since they weren't designed or equipped for long-range operations. At least he and his crew would have a chance to strike out against the black ones . . . and maybe, just maybe they could hit them where it hurt.

"T-minus ten seconds . . ." droned the computer in a cold, sanitary, unfeminine female voice. He stiffened and waited.

"T-minus five seconds . . . four. . ." His palms began to sweat, "three . . . two . . . one." Then flatly, "eject!"

The launch pushed Merrill solidly back against his seat and forced the air out of his lungs. Then the tiny Narcissus moved easily through the star-speckled void.

Behind the accelerating Narcissus, a blinding flash signaled the Merrip's destruction. Within seconds, the violent shock wave rocked the fighter, and Merrill felt an odd sensation as his skin and nerves seemed to tingle. A sister fighter above him exploded into atoms as the group moved steadily forward. Ahead, the huge form of the enemy battleship was still sliding out into temporal space. God! It was monstrous!

Eber gritted his teeth and fastened his attention on his controls. During combat, they were fully manual.

Another shock wave rocked the ship as he worked to realign his trajectory. Suddenly from out of nowhere, another 19 fighters swarmed around him, and he realized that this was his flotilla.

Working carefully according to plan, Merrill managed to form into a reinforced diamond wedge formation, in which the diamond was filled in with all the vessels. It was hoped that their combined numbers would increase their impact capacity when they reached the enemy's shields.

They moved closer to the looming mass, which now took up the Narcissus's entire gridscreen. An angry red light flashed on his control console. "The drives are overheating from blast damage,"

shouted Amcren, his engineer. He gritted his teeth and pressed on. "Damn," he mumbled, "I've got to make it."

Merrill Eber felt icy fear and dogged determination as his fighter sped closer to the black mass. Soon, he could see nothing but the black hull ahead of him with its odd protrusions and . . . something else.

Despite his sure knowledge that this was the last thing he'd ever see in this life, Merrill found himself amazed at the technology that could produce this incredible ship.

The bridge of the *Narcissus* became completely silent; all knew that this was it, that there was no turning back. They could barely see the dim distortion caused by the enemy's shields ahead of them; glowing softly.

"Jorick," Merrill called out into his comm-link, "fire all lasers straight ahead. Let's see if we can brighten that shield."

Dull green flashes appeared far ahead as the enemy's vibrating shields absorbed the laser beams. Other fighters in the diamond began firing their lasers for the same effect as they quickly approached the huge vessel.

Suddenly the enemy's fire control became aware of the small fighters approaching his lower amidships magazines. Directing lase-mag tracks at the incoming specks, the enemy fire control coordinator noted a number of inordinately large nuclear explosions. Far too large for such small craft, he thought to himself.

The enemy batteries continued to fire at the flotilla of almost insignificant G.C.C. fighters, destroying a number of them. Then suddenly, all firepower in their direction stopped!

Eber's heartbeat nearly stopped as well. Now there were only 14 fighters left, and the jutting protrusion of the enemy flagship loomed ever closer. He suddenly realized that this jutting outcrop was a part of the nonreflecting opening to one of the vessel's many cargo bays. But more important, he realized that the other enemy ships had ceased to fire in the attacking wedge formation's direction! They were afraid of hitting their own vessels!

"Communications transmit now!" he barked, trying to control his rising emotions. "Open, Lieutenant."

He spoke loudly and precisely through the static noise that ensued. "The enemy fears own firepower, Repeat! The enemy. . . ."

The transmission was abruptly cut off when the *Narcissus*, the foremost in the diamond wedge, hit the enemy shield.

Captain Ross Markel of the heavy-cruiser '*Abascus*' swiveled in his chair. "What is that, Communications?"

The mystified communications officer replayed the static that suddenly broke in on the silent emergency channel. At first it just sounded like noise but. . . .

Markel listened intently to the static, then, nodded. His young communications officer, still mystified, asked "sir?"

"Feed it to CIC for clarification."

"Yes sir," she answered, "for static?" Hell! But Markel was no fool that was for sure. It was rumored he was an illegitimate brother of the famous Captain Juger Roydel and had the same extraordinary command abilities as all the Roydels, although this was never confirmed. But if the captain said he'd heard something, he probably had.

Within a few minutes, CIC was on the comm-link. "We have it Captain," the intelligence analyst spoke quickly. "Here it is . . . enemy fears own firepower. Repeat. Enemy fears. . . ."

Markel swiveled to face the gridscreen. "Where did that come from?" he asked.

"Gridzone 2-C33, at four degrees off port-bow, and three degrees above the elliptic", answered the navigator.

Markel rubbed his chin, his grey eyes narrowing. Meanwhile, his weapons sections continued to fire and the helm took evasive action as he'd previously ordered.

"Make for gridzone 2-C33," he ordered, "and keep our communications open with Admiralty Intelligence."

Looking intently at an approaching enemy capital ship, Markel noticed something on the facing side was odd. Of course! Someone tried to penetrate the shield!

Markel's wedge, now with only three ships, made for the small, barely noticeable cloud in the flagship's shield.

Admiral Afrak grimaced as he watched the developments of his fleet in the battle zone's mid-right flank. Everything was going to hell, and there seemed to be nothing he or his men could do about it.

He continued monitoring the numerous reports which steadily poured in, detailing the massive destruction of the combined fleets.

Their determined suicide attacks on the enemy's capital ships, had limited success but no real slow down of the invaders. There were just too many of the gigantic ships, and their defensive screens and withering firepower were awesome. One report stated that one of the outlying moons, which held several hundred defensive stations, was blown to atoms by the enemy's weapons. As far as could be ascertained, the stations hadn't fired at the enemy fleet, but were simply in the way of firepower meant for a flotilla of G.C.C. warships, which was also vaporized.

He shook his head. They were killing an inordinately large number of enemy ships, but they were still losing. That's all there was to it. Even the remainder of the cargo and auxiliary ships meant for torpedoes, which were still on their way to the battle area, would have no real impact. The combined fleets were being slaughtered out there, and there was nothing that could be done.

Admiral Ariel Spantu stood alongside Afrak, just as worried and just as stumped. Then he nodded to himself.

"Well Meirer," he said turning to Afrak and gesturing toward the holo-arena. "I think the time's finally come to resort to our ground stations. All of our 10,000,000 war-ships and 90,000,000 fighters have nearly been wiped out. We'd better bring our contingency plans into effect while we still have ships to serve as bait."

Afrak looked at him tiredly, then, nodded. Now was the time to use the combined resources of all his remaining planetary fire support bases to direct zoned pockets of firepower. If this tactic worked properly, the enemy would sustain sizeable losses, more than could possibly be inflicted by remaining G.C.C. fleet elements. It wouldn't win the war, but it would reduce the enemy's numbers. Beyond that, it was anyone's guess. No one knew how many more enemy invaders were as yet to come.

Afrak nodded, and both turned to contact the other top-ranking members of G.C.C. Admiralty. This decision would take all of them since their reserves, including the Admiralty itself, were being committed to the battle. Time was a vital factor now.

Senior-General Hans Brufek sat alone in the wide conference room. He was tired, very tired. This damn invasion took the best that humanity had, everything that was sacred and beautiful, to protect their Starset galaxy against Sargon's faithful legions. All of those young men and women who'd given their very beings to

defend human destiny against Belial's hordes would be lost out here in the void forever.

He'd just contacted the divisional commanders of his perimeter defense forces to inform them of the battle situation. The navy had been reduced to a handful of scattered ships and they were going to fight to the bitter end, and bitter it would be. Now, his planetary fire bases were being brought into action as a last desperate resort to stop the overpowering enemy.

The navy was depleted to a fraction of its beginning numbers and its ragged remnants tried to maneuver the enemy into positions where the fire bases could inflict maximum damage. The plan looked good on paper, but would it work? Hans had no illusions about his fire bases surviving the action; it was important that they cripple the incoming enemy fleet. It was up to them to fight to the end, no matter what the consequences. They had no other answer.

Hans was grateful he was still in the battle zone and would be with his troops in their greatest hours of trial. He felt fortunate to be able to serve with these brave young men and women. God! They had to win! There was too much at stake!

Captain Markel sat still, studying the gridscreen as the Abascus moved toward the enemy battleship. The bridge was quiet and everyone appeared as shadowy shapes in the dim red chem-lights. He could hear a pin drop.

"Captain, a breach in the enemy's shield has been confirmed and the exact coordinates plotted."

"What was that?" he barked, swiveling to face the scanning officer. "How can you confirm the nonexistence of something our gunners can't even pick up as being there?"

The mate, who was filling in for the recently killed scanning, recoiled visibly. "Well, sir, the scanners show the area as being completely void, whereas they don't show quite the same readings for the rest. It's just a minor difference, but a difference all the same. I assumed. . . ."

"Belay it," Markel ordered, grinning broadly and rubbing his bearded chin. "Recheck that data and verify your readings."

The mate turned back to his console and began the scanning process to verify his data.

Markel turned to face his communications liaison officer, who was, with the foresight expected of her, already preparing to

transmit the data. "Transfer that reading directly to Admiralty Intelligence!"

"Transmission in process," she responded.

Twenty seconds later, "transmission one completed, repeat cycle in process."

Captain Markel's pleased nod was cut off as the Abascus surged and shuddered; something shrieked in the distance.

"Evasive action, make for that breach!" he barked.

Again the ship shrieked as her entire structure was subjected to unbearable strain. She attempted to move toward the enemy ship.

The ship surged and rocked violently, tearing Markel from his command chair, as the straps gave way under the excessive strain. Suddenly, both his legs were spurting blood from deep gashes penetrating his environmental uniform where the straps had cut into them.

He crawled back to his chair and held on more by sheer will power than strength as the bridge shook and rocked again.

"Helm . . . flank speed toward that breach!"

Groaning, the tortured Abascus sluggishly responded, then shot forward towards the black mass. Markel dimly heard reports about the destruction of one of his remaining three wedge mates and the incapacitation of the others, but ignored them.

Suddenly enemy fire directed against them ceased, just as the static-filled message had reported. The Abascus moved unhindered toward it at flank speed.

Almost as if on some intragalactic cue, thousands of fire bases on outlying moons in the ragged battle zone began hurtling their combined strength out into the void. None had atmospheric friction or turbulence to worry about, since the surfaces of the moons where the bases were situated were as cold and empty as space itself.

Many of the G.C.C. warships which appeared to be fleeing the battle zone to recover and regroup, suddenly turned back and began to fight for all they were worth. Without warning, a vast array of missiles from hidden sources came into contact with the pursuing enemy battle groups. The sudden onrush of deadly planet-based missiles struck confusion among the black cruisers, and disrupted their formations. Many were torn open by the massive explosions and others collided with their own ships as

they tried to evade the surprise attack. Surprisingly few enemy ships were actually destroyed, but many sustained serious damage that hindered their battle effectiveness.

Afrak stood in front of the holo-arena, studying each action of the ongoing battle as it showed up on the detailed holographic grid.

At first, surprise and immense concentrations of planet-based firepower disrupted the enemy's formations. For a short time a large number of enemy ships were either destroyed or badly damaged. Then after initial confusion, the enemy ships began to form back into stable groups and to return fire against the planetary bases.

Afrak looked at Spantu, who nodded tiredly. "We should be entering the mainline in five minutes, Ariel," the old man spoke softly. "Let's hope we have as much courage and effectiveness as those brave young men and women have displayed." The situation looked bad, but Afrak never doubted his fleets and ground forces could cripple the enemy badly enough to halt his invasion. He didn't have to win the battle to effectively stop the enemy, but he did have to fight to the bitter end. Now all he had left were the ragged remnants of his combined fleets and 280,000 reserves that were joining into the last hours of battle. Then it would be all over, and only history would be the judge of his fleet's success or failure.

Captain Ross Markel gripped the sides of his command chair, sweating. Hail and brimstone, it was hot in here and his legs were aching and raw. "We have to get through that damned hole . . . oh God, we have to get through it!"

He was dead tired like he'd never been before. There had always been a chance to come out of battle alive, however slim that chance was. But, not this time. He wondered what the enemy ships were like inside. Were they sleek and black like this one was on the outside? Were they alive?

The bridge was silent, and nothing came over any of the comm-links. Everyone who was still alive had their private thoughts as the end came ever nearer. It would be any second now.

Suddenly they moved through the hole in the shield, and the jutting protrusion on the enemy vessel loomed up, distinctly clearer. As the Abascus hurtled towards it, Markel sat upright and wide-eyed in awe.

Something reflected on a portion of the outcrop, and he sat nearly transfixed. "By the Eternal, it's a hangar!"

The cruiser Abascus shot straight into the huge opening and Ross Markel's last wish was gratified.

Then, after a few seconds and 70 kilometers later, her sub-binaries detonated, rocking the giant capital ship. Markel's last fleeting impression was one of some alien surprise. Could a ship be surprised by an intruder? He never found out.

Chapter 21

Sargon

The moment finally arrived when Sweet Josargon entered our beautiful Starset Galaxy to liberate his faithful . . . and of course, there were welcoming throngs . . . or remnants. . . .

18:04-16 BENEM 6192-7N5

Josargon sat quietly in his white throne room, listening to soft music while his lovely consort, Cherytiamat, rhythmically massaged his loins with small delicate hands and gently kissed his thighs and abdomen. He sipped a sweet green liqueur, as he considered his upcoming victory. He looked forward to presenting this gift to his almighty and eternal father, Samael.

Reports of fierce battles raging ahead were pouring in. Obviously, the inferior enemy had committed their entire defensive fleet to this action. They didn't realize that the bulk of his armada would soon descend upon them and decimate their remaining numbers. It would all be over within hours, for no further organized resistance of any consequence existed that could stand between him and this corner of the Starset galaxy. Then the slow process of subordinating the entire galaxy would begin in earnest.

Josargon had no illusions about his superiority of power and technology over this primitive enemy. He knew everything his predecessor, Gensargon, had learned and done, and made plans to continue his holy work. He wouldn't make the same mistake as Gensargon had, underestimating the primitive enemy. Now he would squash them in battle, then, send extensive armadas to conquer every world in their path. He would gain new allies among

the primitives, which would be no problem, since most of the childish intellects in this galaxy were all too willing to join his legions of light and to accept his universal rule of peace and order.

No, he had no intention of failing in his holy assignment to possess this precious Starset galaxy, as Gensargon had. He would not disappoint his glorious father, Samael, who expected nothing less than complete success. This he would most certainly give.

Josargon relaxed his body after experiencing a pleasant orgasm, and sipped again at his sweet liqueur. He gazed down at his lovely consort. Cheryl-tiamat was lovely with a petite figure, which well-offset his own tall and muscular frame. Both had blond hair that was as fine as spun gold, and dark blue eyes. In fact, they looked much like brother and sister.

Tiamat looked lovingly up at him from beneath her long black lashes, tilting her heart-shaped face a little. Josargon ran his index finger along her delicate jaw, pleased by her classic beauty. She smiled a little, with a slight upturning of one side of her lovely lips, and continued to gently massage his loins, bending wholeheartedly to her pleasant task. After all, it was her greatest pleasure in life to serve her holy lord, Sweet Sargon, son of Samael.

Soft chiming from Josargon's diamond-studded comm-unit interrupted his thoughts. Cheryl-tiamat, displeased at the interruption of her activity, handed him the receiver which was for his ears only.

The soft, cultured voice of Admiral Varnicuum Nobolinous, announced that Sargon's flagship, aptly named 'Samael-Bal', would enter temporal space in five minutes. The Samael-Bal would be in position to observe his fleet's action against the savages on his long-range viewscreens. Josargon hoped there would be an enemy left by the time he arrived, since so many had already been destroyed.

Josargon thanked him quietly and handed the comm-unit back to Cheryl-tiamat, pleased. He looked forward to seeing for himself just how these primitive creatures conducted themselves against his superior forces. Of course, if they were willing to surrender and come over to him, or simply give up, he would be understanding and forgive them. After all, he was here as their savior, and his only real enemies, in the name of his father Samael, were those degenerate creatures who followed Marah the Scoffer. These base

creatures were responsible for poisoning all around them with their uncouth ideologies based on emotionalism and compassion.

Josargon knew, with the sure and true knowledge of all the enlightened and faithful, that childish compassion only led to weakness and foolish illusions. Scoffing Marah's followers spent the millennia pursuing a false doctrine which, in the end, would lead them into darkness devoid of the true and divine light of Samael. He would, on the other hand, lead these primitive creatures on a crusade for universal peace that would fill the cosmos with the glorious calm and uniformity of his Holy Father's will.

But then, they were such primitive and simple creatures. They couldn't be expected to know they were being seduced by the Scoffer's feminine ways. Now, he would show them the correct way to find the glory of his Father's Eternal Light!

A soft chime sounded throughout Josargon's magnificent apartments, gently announcing the flagship's shift into temporal space.

Gesturing subtly with his slim, exquisitely manicured hand, Josargon dismissed Cheryltiamat turning his attention to his large diamond-framed viewscreen which would display the events of the battle in vivid color. He would enter the battle sector on the enemy's mid-right flank, which still showed some organized forces and a bit of vigorous resistance.

Tiamat silently bowed and left for an adjoining suite. She was pleased her lord spent so much time with her on this journey. She even held a small, almost forbidden hope that he might be pleased enough to allow her to bear his child. That would be glorious indeed! They had been apart for so long before beginning this long and sweet journey, and she hoped to become more dear and prominent in his considerations during the future.

Looking around her modestly appointed quarters, which were only 65,000 square meters - occupying three levels - she decided to take a scented bath. She nodded and one of her 27 servants drew it, while another young girl, gently brushed her long, silken gold hair and arranged it pleasingly atop her head. Then, nodding at the girl, she entered her bath. The lovely young girl was honored beyond description. Tiamat had actually noticed her!

As the long, sleek Samael-Bal broke slowly into temporal space, Josargon's 10 by 20 meter viewscreen lit up with a panorama of exploding vessels which illuminated the void like small stars. To the far right, there was an immense flash as if a supernova had just occurred. He didn't realize that it was caused by 14 G.C.C. fighter-lifeboats, loaded with thermal mines, which had come into disastrous contact with his flagship's shields.

His attention focused on the center of the screen, where bright detonations of enemy vessels flashed across the void. The primitives were actually trying to attack his command ship.

"How bold they are," he smiled to himself as ship after ship exploded without any useful effect.

Josargon sat alone silently for two hours, watching as the primitive warships hurled themselves at his giant cruisers and capital ships. Some actually penetrated the screen shields and making contact with his heavy cruisers. This very tenacity intrigued him and he began to enjoy their relentless efforts. It was unfortunate that they were running out of ships, although others slowly made their way to the slaughter. He noted roughly 250,000 enemy warships, probably their reserves, about to join in the battle in an act of supreme sacrifice to their futile cause.

Josargon's diamond-studded comm-unit sounded another low chime, but he ignored it for the moment, enjoying this singularly beautiful display. Gensargon was right; the brightness of this small galaxy was quite extraordinary. It seemed that here, after these initial battles had been won by his fleet, would be an excellent place to build another fortress, to command this entire quadrant of this lovely galaxy.

A blinding flash blanked out his viewscreen. After a few seconds the Samael-Bal lurched and shuddered as if struck by a large, solid object.

Josargon raised an eyebrow, surprised, but unperturbed.

The diamond-studded comm-unit chimed insistently. He paused while reaching for it as Cheryltiamat ran quickly into his throne room, still wet from the bath she'd just exited. Her eyes were silver coins of terror, although Josargon only noticed the small peaks and foams of scented blue bubbles sliding down her slick, white body. One was perched on one of her nipples. As disturbed as he was at her lack of consideration by bursting in on

him without first asking his permission, he felt a warming attraction for her lovely body.

"My lord, we've just been. . . ."

The Samael-Bal gave a convulsive lurch that jarred everything loose, and Josargon felt his first real surprise. Of course nothing of real consequence could happen to his flagship, not from such primitive and small warships.

The ship trembled as dull thumps sounded in the distance. A loud detonation followed by another buckled the throne room's deck plates, and their bodies were thrown around like small rag dolls. Josargon smashed headlong against his blank viewscreen, and already dead when he was impaled by the long jeweled point of a magnificent light fixture which fell on him. A sheet of flying metal decapitated Cheryltiamat.

From the bridge of the medium-cruiser 'Nostalibin', G.C.C. XXIVth Fleet Admiral Tor Nagel witnessed the blinding explosion of Josargon's overpowering flagship on his gridscreen. He had no idea whose vessel it was, but he was glad to see it go.

"My God!" he murmured. "I've never in my life seen anything as powerful as that. . . ."

Then the ring of enemy escort cruisers detonated, sending high-energy particles through the Nostalibin moments later, freezing everyone in place immediately.

Admiral Afrak stood alone, staring wearily into the holo-arena and trying to decide what to do next. Most of his reserve ships were just entering the fray and the situation looked bleak. Most of the defensive fire bases had been either destroyed or badly damaged, although not before they'd fired their major weapons into the enemy fleet. Considering the matter, Afrak realized they'd been both necessary and effective. Had he not utilized the fire bases, he wouldn't have a G.C.C. ship left to fight with. Hans Brufek was right to insist on them as a last ditch measure.

Another wave of enemy capital ships had just entered into temporal space, and it looked as if this would be the last real engagement in the war. At best, the remnants of his combined fleets could hold out another 10 or 12 hours, providing he used his remaining reserves wisely. Not one ship could be wasted and every attack must be damaging to the enemy. Afrak reviewed his new battle orders before issuing them. He was assigning all decision-making to individual commanders and spreading his wedges

farther apart to allow more room for maneuver. He hoped the new attack details would work. They were a summary of all the actions that had been successful to date, and catalogued for quick reference by each ship's commander.

Afrak's shoulders slumped; he was known for his vitality and vigor. Now he was totally exhausted, but he'd make it to the bitter end. There was always that hidden equation that turned the tide of battle, no matter how bleak things looked on the surface. He was going to stick it out.

As if by some secret, instantaneous signal, the entire enemy fleet began to disengage the G.C.C. warships and to turn back. The remnants of the combined fleets fell on the retreating enemy like birds of prey, inflicting terrible losses on him since he made no attempt to fight back. Then, one by one, the surviving enemy ships began dropping back into the sub-binary, some exploding in the process. Those which were too badly damaged to enter the sub-binary self-detonated, leaving only deadly clouds of radioactive gasses behind. Josargon, their god, was dead. There was nothing they could do but return home to face Samael's judgment.

Afrak stared at his gridscreen, amazed. The invasion fleet was retreating! No return fire, nothing! Shaking his head slowly, Afrak mused that something catastrophic must have happened to cause this unwarranted behavior. The filthy beasts had already won the battle and now they were actually running away! Whatever the reason, Afrak thanked the Creator for this moment of grace; his navy's sacrifices had not been in vain after all.

Suddenly, the battle was over, leaving only the battered remnants of the G.C.C. combined fleets to regroup, pick up survivors, and limp home. The invading hordes from Samael's far-off empire had left without looking back. Now it was time to decide what to do next. It would take thousands of years for the G.C.C. to recover from this terrible carnage.

The entire battle zone remained a gaseous cloud of charged particles, which slowly expanded and dissipated into the void between the brilliantly shining fields of silent stars. It was all that remained of more than 10,000,000 G.C.C. warships and 7,000,000 enemy vessels.

The terrible invasion of Samael's black Legions of Light, led by their glorious Sweet Sargon, had ended in failure, and now his wounded fleets were returning home to prepare for their next

attempt. There would be another Sweet Sargon who would make claim to the beautiful Starset galaxy, and he would come in good time.

Chapter 22

Parting

There are times in life when our promises and best of intentions can't be kept . . . no matter who we are. . . .

13:40-08 ARKEM 6193-7N5

Sister-Lieutenant Cromel Dinost leaned comfortably back in her padded chair. Her feet were propped up on the navigator's plot desk as she read the latest news reports from the G.C.C.'s combined fleets.

Shaking her head sadly, she turned to the navigator. "Do you realize that if the black bastards had stuck it out for another ten hours, they'd have totally wiped the whole damned combined fleet out of existence? As it is, there's hardly anything left. I don't know why they turned tail when they did, but it sure saved the day."

Kyung slouched in her chair, watching her plot console absently. "I can't figure it out either. Unless, it's as Miriam suggested, our team got one of their biggies and spooked them. Who knows? Well anyway, they should be making it out here pretty soon."

The two lazily continued with their speculations for lack of anything better to do. The Whisper had spread a pattern of 600 thermal mines in the immediate area, per Council Central's orders. Hopefully, they'd damage or destroy some of the returning enemy ships breaking into temporal space to make course corrections. The enemy didn't know that anyone was out here, so he wouldn't have his screens up. The thermal mines could possibly destroy already wounded vessels, while damaging others before they

returned to the sub-binary. The Whisper, and all Nashramh and Ansharim vessels were ordered to attack the incoming enemy fleet with torpedo canisters, mines, and lasers, and to inflict as much damage as possible. Anything that got away now would come back later, so it was imperative that they be attacked at any cost.

Jenn sat alone at her comm-console, watching the gridscreen carefully. Nothing showed on it at the moment. The huge enemy invasion force that passed two months earlier, had suddenly returned. After making course corrections for some unknown destination beyond the Starset, they dropped back into the sub-binary and were gone. Miriam said they'd probably received special communications in the sub-binary before getting even a third of the way to UP8816U and reversed their course to return to wherever their home was.

As soon as this happened, Kyung, one of Jenn's closest friends aboard the Whisper, locked herself up for a couple of days to work out notations about the enemy course corrections. She tried the procedure used on the incoming ships six months before as well as a few others. After two days she came out looking haggard and worn, with bad news. The accepted procedure didn't work because the vast distances to be covered were too great. The enemy headed in a direction where there were no galaxies for millions of light years, so she was unable to pinpoint any of the three visible ones in the neighborhood as being the source of Belial's far-off empire.

"They may well have come from even further away than we thought," she finished sadly. It was her hope to at least figure out where they'd come from.

Jenn didn't quite understand. "Why do distances make such a difference?"

Kyung thought for a moment before answering. "Well, it's a problem of knowing exactly what their course plan is. We don't know if they correct their heading more than once because of the distance to be traveled, or if they're making directly for their own galaxy. There are three galaxies in the neighborhood; all of them are at different distances and only appear to be near one another. The black ships are headed toward some point between the three and we have no way of knowing which, if any of them, they're heading for."

One thing became apparent as soon as the enemy vessels returned: the black ones had changed their entire code structure,

and as yet, the code analysts at Council Central hadn't broken them. Clearly the remnants of the enemy fleet were headed back towards the Whisper and other outlying patrol vessels, apparently in full retreat. This couldn't be fully verified until the black vessels passed back through all the outlying patrol grids and altered their course headings as the previous ships had.

Jenn frowned. She expected the telltale indications of disturbances in the sub-binary to show on her screen at any time now, announcing the enemy fleet's arrival. Somehow she felt uneasy, more so than usual for this kind of situation. She mused that her first deep space assignment was getting to her. She was used to having the feel of solid ground under her feet and lots of fresh air. She'd always liked traveling in space, but here the novelty had long since worn off.

Besides, no one knew what to expect when the enemy returned and hit the thermal mines they'd spread around. So, they waited patiently for the inevitable.

Miriam knocked on the hatch of Bish Roanim's cabin, and waited for a moment. Within seconds, Bish's soft voice sounded through the hatch. "Come on in."

She opened the hatch and entered, closing it behind her. The cabin, like all the others, was small, but Bish was the only one to have her own. Miriam grinned wryly and commented, "well, rank does have its little privileges."

Right now Bish looked tired. There'd been no activity for several days, but she never really let her guard down, and it showed on her lined and haggard face. The orders from Council Central to attack all incoming enemy vessels with their torpedo canisters and laser fire ground at her nerves, giving her many sleepless hours studying different tactics. She wanted to destroy the enemy's ships, not her own. Miriam understood this and had come both to inform her of Council Central's thinking and to cheer her up.

"If rank had such privileges, you'd have this luxurious suite. But then, we politicians have a way of getting the best." Bish smiled and waved Miriam to her guest couch.

"Well, Captain, Council Central has a pretty good idea of what happened to our erstwhile invaders," she began, seating herself on Bish's overstuffed couch. "In a nutshell, they think Josargon was aboard one of the capital ships that were destroyed during the final phase of the battle."

Bish poured Miriam a hot, spiced drink, pleased to have her company. The elf girl was normally reserved, but she was a good friend who had the uncanny ability to make one forget one's worries with engaging conversations and cheeky quips. She was also a Magum with a wealth of information.

"How did they come to that conclusion?" she asked, unsurprised. "Did we break their codes?"

Miriam shook her head, and thanked her for the chenoline, "No, not the codes. We surmised this after a comprehensive analysis of the enemy's responses to certain situations."

She stirred her drink, apparently lost in thought. "You may not remember this, but back in JERIN 6707-6N5, when Borgdragon fortress blew sky-high, and their dear Sweet Sargon with it, they panicked. The black legions, without the authority of their Lord Sargon or their lady Tiamat, who often ruled in his stead, drew in their horns and switched all of their code sequences. Then they waited."

"Waited for what?" Bish countered, very curious. She'd heard rumors that Miriam was involved in the destruction of one of the ancient black fortresses, and was interested to learn more.

"Why, obviously for a new sign. You know, from your academy history courses, that the black ones need a sign from God before taking action; they aren't rewarded for foresight or initiative in most cases. Then Josargon showed up. Rather, the rumor was spread that he was coming to liberate his faithful from their long curse of darkness. All would be well again. His legions returned to their same old ways of conquest: subverting host populations with newer and stronger efforts. Their Jerden agents infiltrated whatever warring faction opened to their ways and planted the seeds of dissension among them. Through the limitations imposed by these actions, the enemy has attempted to control our own growth and strength by making use of our weaknesses and insecurities."

She sipped at her chenoline. "The essential element here is when they lose one of their Belials, everything stops until he's replaced. They need god himself in order to function." Miriam paused for a thoughtful moment. Then waving her hand she continued. "Knowing the black ones' goal of conquering the Starset for their lord's fiefdom, they should have sent a Belial right away - and maybe they did. We should mention to Kyung that it's taken

10,000 years for him to arrive; that may give her some insights into the distances traveled by the black fleet."

"That really sounds good, Miriam", Bish agreed, "and it could be true. But, what if they're just regrouping somewhere beyond our scanner range?"

"We don't think so," Miriam smiled. "You see, before they left the battle zone, all their badly wounded vessels self-destructed. It was nothing like the situation when we destroyed Samael-Agtren; in that case, they regrouped immediately and went on the offensive with their limited fleet of cruisers. But now Council Central is of the opinion that they'll be a long time preparing for a comeback. And maybe they'll change their tactics as well."

She sipped at her chenoline again. "Besides, if the black ones only needed to regroup, they certainly would've seen to it that the combined fleets were completely wiped out first. There was no question in anyone's mind that the G.C.C. fleet was nearly nonexistent and completely beaten. But, for some reason, the enemy turned tail and ran while he obviously had the upper hand."

She smiled slowly, and her voice brightened. "No, this does smack of some inner catastrophe, such as losing their god, their symbol of ultimate leadership. Such things have happened before in our experience with them."

"Besides," she added, almost as an afterthought, "when the fleets return this way, we'll be able to observe and analyze their condition and see if they're in any shape to return soon. And then, of course, we have our own little reception gifts to help reduce their chances."

Bish nodded with a smile. "And next time, we may be able to beat the crap out of them again."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Miriam spoke seriously. "The combined fleets were, in fact, defeated. They couldn't have survived another 10 hours under the best conditions, and the enemy was still forming into fresh and effective battle groups." She shook her head, and spoke slowly. "No, nobody won anything except a stay of execution. And unless we come up with something that matches their advanced weapons systems, we're in for some real trouble next time. You can be sure they won't repeat their mistakes. Our problems are just beginning."

Bish agreed. "At least we have some idea of their fleet capabilities, and perhaps someday we might match it. Maybe

somewhere out there in the battle zone, one of their ships didn't self-destruct. We won't know for some time, but then maybe we'll be lucky enough to get a sample of their technology. Fate has some strange twists, you know. Like the enemy turning and running at the last moment."

Captain Roanim's comm-link buzzed, and she turned to answer it. "Excuse me, Miriam."

"Captain," Jenn's voice came over the comm-link. "I've detected signals of enemy activity in the sub-binary, and they should be breaking into temporal space in about ten minutes."

Bish acknowledged the report, and then signed off after calling the Whisper to general quarters. Both she and Miriam donned their headgear and made directly for their battle stations.

Bish arrived at the bridge within minutes of sounding general quarters, and slid into her command chair as Miriam entered the situation room below. "Status?" she asked briskly.

All sections reported condition green, as Bish turned her attention to her gridscreen. She watched intently as the first of the enemy ships broke into temporal space, noting that none showed signs of battle damage. Then, bright flashes of exploding thermal mines lit up the void as they impacted against the emerging vessels. Oddly, none of the enemy warships stopped nor seemed to take notice of the damage done to them. One by one, each made its course correction and dropped back into the sub-binary without pausing. The gunnery officer reported that 586 mine detonations, leaving 14 unaccounted for. None of the enemy warships had been destroyed. After an hour and 15 minutes, the black ships passed into the sub-binary and the Whisper's crew waited for the next group to arrive.

Jenn's squeaky voice broke through the open comm-link, sounding breathless and excited. "Captain, here come the biggies," she cried, easily recognizing the odd disturbances as those from the hulking capital ships.

Bish concentrated on the screen as the first of the huge ships began to pull out of the sub-binary; the scene never ceased to fascinate her. But now she looked for one she could attack effectively. Her orders were to concentrate her efforts on wounded ships only. Based on the experience earlier of her thermal mines detonating against unharmed vessels, she found the order

reasonable. Council Central's reason for attacking was to destroy as many enemy ships as possible, not just damage them.

The situation had changed. Bish could see definite effects of battle damage on many of these ships, which had broken into temporal space no more than 10,000 kilometers away. Utilizing stepped-up magnification, Bish began picking out a number of targets.

One battleship had two huge craters on its port side, just forward of amidships. Each crater, according to Kyung's computer readouts, spanned about 55 kilometers in diameter.

Bish ordered, "Helm, make for the aft crater on the battlewagon 16 degrees off starboard-bow. Forward weapons section prepare to fire 30 torpedo canisters on my signal. Laser sections. . . ." A brilliant flash from nearby signaled the detonation of a thermal mine, followed by a second and a third.

Another blinding flash lit up the gridscreen, jolting the Whisper as if struck by a thermal mine. All lights blinked out, twisting metal screamed, and bodies were torn from their chairs and scattered around like dolls.

Jenn could hear thumps and cries through the comm-link, and objects of all kinds smashed against the buckling bulkheads all around her. She squeezed her eyes shut and clasped her hands over her earphones in a vain attempt to muffle the overwhelming din.

Within seconds, red emergency chem-lights flickered on as everyone scrambled to her battle station. The klaxon sounded shrilly throughout the ship and within a few seconds, somebody shut it off. Both Miriam and Jenn had fared well, since they'd been strapped into their command chairs during general quarters. The engineering personnel in the stern of the ship had suffered broken arms and other wounds, since the main thrust of the explosion came from astern and below. Bish soon learned that no one had been killed.

During long, slow minutes, the situation and damage reports poured into the ship's bridge, giving Bish a clear picture of what happened.

The good news was that they'd neither been attacked nor struck by a thermal mine. Only the force of an exploding enemy warship nearby had jolted the Whisper and caused all the damage. The bad news was that all the ship's power transformers had blown from

overloading from massive amounts of energy released by the explosion. Fortunately, the Whisper's cloaking field absorbed and dissipated the deadly high-energy particles from the explosion, thus saving the lives of everyone on board. In the process, the transformers were destroyed.

Now the Whisper lay motionless in the void, without the benefit of her cloaking system or any operational drive units. She was now a derelict without defenses or any means of movement. All around her, the enemy still moved silently along.

Bish wanted to scream at the hopelessness of it, but couldn't afford the luxury. She had no way to repair the heavily damaged Whisper without spacedock facilities, and all they could do now was sit and wait for the enemy to pass, and to hope they wouldn't be noticed. Indeed, the enemy didn't appear interested in fighting, since he just continued to make his course alterations and drop back into the sub-binary.

As soon as the ship's damage reports were in, all uninjured personnel began work. An emergency powerpack was used to operate essential shipboard systems such as lights, life-support machinery, and the gridscreens. Under no circumstances did Bish want to be blind, crippled perhaps, but not blind.

Miriam notified Council Central of their situation. She was advised to dispatch the two lifeboats with all nonessential personnel as soon as possible, whenever the enemy had passed or when there was a lull. She was instructed to remain with the Whisper herself, to maintain the flow of vital communications.

After Miriam related her orders to Bish, Ruby spoke with her, apprising her of the enemy's retreat along the grid of deep probe scouts. It appeared that fewer than 1,000,000 enemy ships escaped from the battle zone, although most of the colossal capital vessels retreated unharmed. Both Nashramh and Ansharim probe vessels attacked the retreating enemy warships as they emerged from the sub-binary and inflicted further damage on their ranks. Thus far, 92,000 Nashramh vessels and 280,000 Ansharim vessels were lost in these attacks which destroyed 116,000 enemy cruisers and damaged many others. Most of the black fleet had passed through the other grids, and not many more were expected to enter the Whisper's immediate location. These were the last to leave the battle zone and were expected to straggle through it during the next five months.

Bish agreed with Council Central's appraisal of the situation, and decided to dispatch the two fighter-lifeboats as soon as there was a letup in the enemy's retreat. "I don't want one of the little ones caught on the enemy's motion-displacement scanners and alert anyone to our presence" She also knew the small ships wouldn't be safe from a collision with the onrushing warships. Then there was the possibility that the enemy rear guard might be alerted to the attacks on their retreating ships and would be looking for their antagonists as they emerged into temporal space.

In the meantime, Bish planned to keep everyone busy with repairing and straightening up what was left of the *Whisper*.

An hour after the damaging shock waves disabled them Sister-Technician Nafuah Kilp addressed her comm-link happily. "Well, Cap'n, I've got some real good news for you."

Bish smiled weakly. "I sure could use some," she countered grimly.

"Our hydroponic units are still fully operational, so we have plenty of fresh air and vegetables."

Nafuah then loudly crunched down on a stalk of crensel to add emphasis to her report. Bish smiled, and looking around, she saw the other bridge members trying not to grin.

"Hey!" she said in mock anger, to ease their tension. "Doesn't everyone have enough to do?"

Within two weeks, all of the *Whisper*'s internal damage had been taken care of. On the surface, she looked like a normally functioning vessel; her main lighting systems were restored and all of her auxiliary, low-draw equipment worked normally. Only the high-draw systems, such as the cloaking device and both the impulse and sub-binary drives, were beyond possible repair.

Bish assigned round-the-clock duty at the deadman switch; she didn't intend to be captured by the enemy if the *Whisper* was detected. Fortunately, the compartment which housed the deadman mechanism was better insulated than the rest of the vessel, for if another explosion occurred nearby and sent deadly high-velocity subatomic particles towards the *Whisper*, there would be nothing to shield the crew from the crystallizing effects. But the 'deadman' on duty would at least have an extra few seconds to release the switch before crystallizing, and hopefully the *Whisper* would detonate without a hitch.

Whomever sat in the deadman position held the spring-loaded switch handle in her right hand, with her left hand grasping the safety lock pin ring. Other than having the safety pin in place, the mechanism was totally armed. The backup detonator system was activated separately. Bish was taking no chances that the Whisper, with her advanced cloaking system, Robel sub-binary drives, and Magum, would fall into enemy hands.

During their remaining stay on the damaged destroyer, Miriam and Jenn spent a great deal of time together for the first time in years. They talked about all sorts of things and reminisced about their childhood together and all of their friends and classmates. Miriam thought it was funny that Jenn couldn't get over how 'that horrible Eaun the toad', had treated her for so long. She didn't seem to remember why she was being trained in the first place.

"Do you know what Eaun told me, Miriam?" Jenn announced staunchly. "She said I was nothing but a germ, and that all I was good for was eating and defecating! Can you believe that?"

Miriam certainly could, and she forced herself not to smile; she thought the situation was funny, but she also knew that Jenn took it seriously as she did her marriage and her job.

Jenn continued on, slightly huffy. "And she made me agree with her, or she said she'd kick the crap out of me. And she meant it, too!" Jenn jabbed her finger at her, and Miriam could imagine the little elf stomping up and down the hall muttering to herself about that horrible Eaun . . . poor Jenn.

Miriam was afraid she'd break out in giggles, and she knew this would insult Jenn to no end. She changed the subject and mentioned Hulican's latest report on Neferah. Then she went on to tell her about how the little Tzian and Sister Irin Nemir initiated their escape on the Oskinben.

Jenn nodded sadly. "I know she's tough, but I like to remember when we were little kids and used to play school under my bed, and listen to your never-ending story, I still don't understand why she never came to see me when she was stationed at Styx Able IV. Oh, I know how she felt about Neftalak . . . but I'd always thought she was my best friend in the galaxy, except for you."

Miriam agreed; she'd already tried to explain Neferah's motivations in the matter, but to no avail. There hadn't been enough free time at the RAD station, so Neferah and Jenn spent pitifully little time together.

As Jenn continued to chatter on, and Miriam listened, she realized that although the little elf was an expert at her job and had an extremely sharp mind for technical matters, she'd never really grown up. She was, in essence, a smart little kid who didn't know how to get mad and just played at life. Miriam would be surprised if she knew that Jenn remembered her old threat to beat the stuffings out of her one day. Jenn still believed Miriam would carry out her threat. Jenn could talk about her disappointments with Neferah and her resentments with Eaun, but she never said a word about Neftalak, Telakin, or her little girl, Myrnah. It hurt her to think about them and their fates, so she pretended nothing had ever happened.

Miriam poured Jenn a drink before they turned in, and they sat and talked as they always did in the evening before retiring. The days were long and tedious, now that nothing much was happening with the enemy except for small groups of retreating warships passing by. There was still cold tension, since no one knew what to expect next.

As Miriam listened to Jenn talk about details of her job, she was once again amazed. In so many ways Jenn was a mere child, but there were times when she surprised Miriam with tough questions that required deep insights to be asked in the first place. Often, Jenn asked the same question, although in different ways, so Miriam was forced to emphasize alternate aspects of the answer each time. Lately they'd discussed the black ones often, especially their methods of gaining strongholds in the Starset.

Jenn sat back after she'd described some of her theories on the codes she was working on, and looked sad. "Miriam, why do people follow the black ones if they know what they're doing is wrong?" she asked softly, suddenly serious. "Just how is it they can sway people so decisively?"

Miriam sat back and sipped her own, a sweet dessert wine made of some sort of berry. "Well Jenn, with the right kind of lever, they can do nearly anything. And believe you me the black ones have no shortage of levers."

Jenn nodded. "I know. And you've told me about their methods of subverting, corrupting, and conquering worlds they've targeted. But why are otherwise intelligent people so influenced by them in the first place? Why?"

"Oh Jenn, there are so many reasons. But, I suppose, on many worlds it all comes back to the myth. A carefully constructed myth is spread through an environment where the population's attitudes are most likely to be affected. For instance, you already know the black ones infiltrate various human races by occupying native bodies. Then as they begin to multiply in numbers, they search out the most favorable conditions within their targeted society by which to gain control of education and government. In this way, they control the growth of that society's moral awareness and technology."

Miriam paused for a moment then continued with a wave of her hand. "But, why blame the black ones in the first place? There are evil men and women in all societies who seek power and influence over their less fortunate neighbors. These evil people always leave a legacy of horror and deprivation after their demise, which everyone can see. The black ones use these local beasts for their own ends, but they keep out of public sight themselves. The black infiltrators are subtle and powerful; true evil is often camouflaged by beauty, wealth, fine words, and institutions. What appears democratic and pluralistic politically may, in fact, be a lightly veiled oligarchical structure operating with an iron fist while fostering the illusion of 'freedom for the masses'. After all, it's the illusion of free choice and personal ownership that most humans settle for, especially if it appears to be secure. In any case, true evil will always make itself seem very fair. And many people are willing to believe in anything that appears good, especially if it seems to be easy."

Jenn tilted her head to the side as she always did when she was trying to look as though she understood something that was really going over her head.

Miriam tried another angle. "Now take the myth, for example. Isn't it pleasing to know you can have faith in a person who's willing to sacrifice everything for a good cause? Isn't it right to glorify this person, to want to follow his or her example, to hope for a reward for successfully following his or her example?"

Jenn nodded her head; she understood that much. "Do you mean like when we were kids and you sacrificed a lot to study really hard, and Neferah and I did the same because of your example and we wanted you to be proud of us?"

Miriam laughed a little. "Well, something likened to that. You know the myth of Sweet Sargon, don't you?"

Jenn nodded again. "About how he threw himself into the sacrificial fire and was rewarded by his adoption as Samael's son and heir, while Tiamat, who hesitated, was punished by being forever subservient to him?"

"Yes," answered Miriam. "On different worlds, this myth is spread to suit each population's special characteristics and circumstances. It arouses a religious fervor among its followers. They're encouraged to emulate Sweet Sargon's example and are promised eternal rewards for their blind faith. All they have to do is be faithful, unthinking followers of Sweet Sargon and sacrifice everything, and he will liberate them from the harshness and uncertainties of their lives. And believe me, the black ones have ways of making even advanced societies that are extremely well-off seem as base and corrupt as primitives, especially when they begin to alter the facts and views of morality and history. What once seemed to be good and beautiful somehow becomes 'base and shoddy'."

"But what does this myth really do?" asked Jenn, a little mystified.

"The black legions don't want to commit large numbers of troops to fight each and every society they encounter. Instead, they create the means by which the people deliver themselves into Belial's hands. And this is easy for them."

Miriam leaned forward with her elbows on her knees. "For instance, take a society which has the black ones infiltrating them in native bodies. No one would know they were being infiltrated. This society may be a moral one that respects the nature of their world and of the Creator's universe. What the black ones do is subtle, but telling. They slowly filter in new ideas under the guise of being the old. For instance, an original law may state murder is wrong under any circumstance. The infiltrators, then, may bring about the idea of justifiable homicide for self-defense, and a long list of other reasonable causes. But within this list of allowable circumstances, they redefine what murder is and thereby institute a legal form of breaking what was a certain and clear law. After a long period of time, murder is rationalized as not only legal but a necessary function of society. There's no end to the applications of this reasoning. Herein lie the seeds of subversion within a stable society when accepted values are watered down and reversed over a period of time. The target society becomes ripe for Sweet Sargon's

liberation. And, incidentally, Sargon often takes on the name of one or more of the world's popular deities."

Leaning back she added, "you see, this contest between the doctrine of Compassionate Justice, and that of Objective, or Discompassionate Justice, is much like a civil war. Not only is the conquering of territory important to the black ones, but so is the winning of human minds and souls. The latter is, I think, more vital to them. Belial's Legions of Light don't put all their resources in one camp, nor do they leave anything to chance. They place their representatives in each faction and work systematically to continue the conflict, while at the same time claiming to be the peacemakers."

"Do we have Belial's infiltrators in our sisterhood?" Jenn asked, fascinated.

"Oh yes, from the very beginning. Have you ever noticed that our security people never deal with anyone else and just keep to themselves? Well, they're essentially a separate society within our sisterhood. Each one of them is special and is in some way in perpetual contact with Council Central. This makes it virtually impossible to infiltrate them. I don't know just who and what they are, but they're responsible for insuring that infiltrators are discovered and ferreted out before they can do any damage. Many years ago, I had a brief experience with this very kind of situation. They are not people you can easily fool."

Jenn nodded, remembering her own experience with these strange and hard-eyed sisters who held her captive at Katolnol Station.

"So, you see, the black enemy is a master of infiltrating and influencing the masses for his vile purposes. He is bold and determined and never gives up. Time is always on his side and he uses it wisely."

"I think I understand," Jenn agreed, and finished her wine. "But, now that you've mentioned it, just who and what are our security people anyway? Are the security sisters on the Whisper the same as the others."

"That, my friend, is another story, and yes they are. I'm going to bed now!" laughed Miriam. "Sometime I'll tell you about Sister Batdor Zell and Sahlie Lor . . . but that's a long story."

After two months of light activity in which declining numbers of enemy ships passed through the Whisper's patrol grid, Captain

Roanim decided to dispatch the two lifeboats during a lull. Crews and passengers were assigned to each of the craft; 13 people to one vessel, to be commanded by Sister-Navigator Kyung Thorin; and 12 to the other, to be commanded by Lieutenant Cromel Dinost.

The crew thoroughly checked out the two ships, and loaded excess supplies in place of the missing passengers. These included weapons, medical supplies, clothing, emergency rations, and communications equipment.

Everyone scheduled to board was checked out to ensure that she was properly armed and had functionally operable survival gear on her person.

With all of the detailed checks and preparations completed, all personnel entered each lifeboat and had their assignments recorded for transmission to Council Central. Since they knew little about the star systems on the very edge of the rim, they had no idea where to head with each lifeboat's limited sub-binary units.

Miriam saw a tearful Jenn off to her assigned lifeboat. The little elf was scared stiff and she cried. "Isn't there some way I can stay here with you, Miriam? Can't you talk to the Captain or something?"

Miriam shook her head patiently; they'd gone over this many times before. "No, Jenn. These orders have come from Council Central and we can't change them," she stated flatly. "You have a good chance of making it back with Lieutenant Dinost at the helm. Jenn, believe me, I know her and she really knows her business."

Jenn shook her head stubbornly, her lower lip trembling. "It just isn't fair, Miriam. I didn't ask to be put on a lifeboat, and you said you wanted me here with you so we could die together. It just isn't fair!" Until now, Jenn had hoped that she could change Miriam's mind, that there was still a chance. She pleaded harder.

Miriam regretfully steered the reluctant little elf to the open hatch. Jenn added, almost under her breath, "Why are you deserting me?"

Miriam stiffened for a moment, Ardel's ancient face suddenly flashing into her mind. Then, she kissed Jenn good-bye. "Take care of yourself, Jenn, and remember that you are one of us. We take care of our own, and we will never abandon you."

Jenn looked her straight in the eyes, seeming suddenly old and mature. "You said that I would never be alone, Miriam. Now you're sending me away. You promised. . . ."

With this, resigned, Jenn turned and slowly entered the lifeboat. Miriam was shocked. She didn't know what to do or say. Then, she stepped back and closed the inner airlock to the vessel. She heard it lock and seal amid voices in her memories.

Stepping back automatically from the Whisper's inner lock, Miriam helped the engineer secure it and retract the transfer tube. Now it was time to go to her duty station and continue with her assignment. Like Jenn, she would try to pretend nothing happened. Ruby had rejected her personal plea to allow Jenn to remain on the Whisper with her, even though she'd insisted on asking several times. She could do nothing except follow her orders. The lifeboat, with Jenn on it, would soon be on its way to the outer rim, and hopefully, civilization.

Jenn sat strapped inside the small lifeboat, alone, for all the attention she paid to her surroundings. She felt much like she had when Neftalak told her of Telakin's death and his own reassignment to the rim. Everything seemed so hopeless and to be closing in on her like thick walls, and she had a gut feeling she wouldn't see Miriam again. Somehow Miriam was now in the misty zones with Telakin, Neftalak, and Myrnah, somewhere she couldn't seem to grasp and recognize. She felt very much alone and in need of someone to talk to.

Miriam stood on the bridge with Bish, watching the two lifeboats launch. They positioned themselves about 100 kilometers from the Whisper. Both ships adjusted their onboard navi-computers, then disappeared as each dropped into the sub-binary.

"They're lucky," Bish said softly. "Those are two of the few lifeboats we have with the new Robel-III sub-binary drives. They should make it to the rim in 68 days. At least they have a fighting chance . . . for us, now that's another question."

Miriam knew the prospects for being rescued out here with the enemy rear guard now beginning to arrive into their grid zone were slim at best. They were sitting ducks.

The Whisper now had eight remaining crew members, which included both Bish and Miriam. They would continue to observe and report all enemy activity until the Whisper was discovered. Then they'd detonate their sub-binary reactors to prevent capture.

Each member of the remaining crew, including Miriam, took her turn at the deadman switch, and each had time to think about the state of affairs. All were resigned to death out here in the void.

The Whisper seemed to be an empty and derelict with most of her crew gone, and the passages were always empty as each woman sat alone at her own duty station. It was a grim time, yet the eight remaining sisters grew closer than ever in spite of it.

Forty-three months later, the Nashramh scout destroyer 'SD Starburst-Sund' pulled alongside the darkened derelict. She removed the eight remaining crew members, along with their security equipment. She gutted the vessel of her sub-binary drive units and cloaking equipment, then, blew her out of existence with a thermal-nuclear mine. Despite the enemy activity in the area, she had somehow escaped detection, and completed her mission successfully.

No news of the two ejected lifeboats had been received, and they were presumed lost. The Starburst dropped back into the sub-binary and made her heading for Rim Area Defense Station IV-2134, seven months distant.

Chapter 23

Beach

Unlike Jennanine B'Mesziah, those who travel through the void between the stars are tough and determined souls who expect the worst, and usually find it. For Jenn, it wasn't the clear and present danger that was so frightening . . . only the loneliness.

14:06-12 SHABIN 6193-7N5

Cromel Dinost carefully adjusted her navi-computer to the coordinates supplied to her by Sister-Navigator Kyung Thorin two hours earlier. Everybody was aboard and accounted for, and all were strapped into their seats awaiting her decision to move.

Rechecking each factor carefully, satisfying herself with the alignment, Cromel activated the final drive sequence. Fifteen seconds later, the small vessel entered the sub-binary and began her 68 day voyage towards the outer rim stargroups. The lifeboat, named the 'Clunk' by Cromel because of all her clanking mechanical parts, dropped into the sub-binary. Then her drives settled to a low purr which was almost silent. Jenn felt as if she were inside a box without windows, from her closed-in perspective; she could neither feel any movement nor hear any sounds of it.

Once Cromel made certain the drives were operating correctly, she turned in her swivel-mounted pilot's chair and faced the others. All were strapped in their seats in the single upper bridge compartment. Below and aft of the bridge were cramped living quarters for crew and passengers. There was also a small engineering area, med-center, and various life support and machinery spaces.

The Clunk was a Class I Lifeboat-Fighter which measured only 80 meters in length, with a beam at her wide stern of 30 meters. She was 16 meters high at her stern and two meters in diameter at her bow. Her total passenger and crew capacity was 16 people, and two Class B-6 impulse reactors and one Robel-IIIAn3 sub-binary unit powered her. All in all, quarters were pretty cramped for even eight people, and Cromel had 12 to worry about. Now it was time to adjust to close living with her 11 sisters.

The long sub-binary voyage was uneventful, and everybody, although cramped, got along well. Each woman wore her atmospheric uniform at all times with the headgear strapped next to her left shoulder, removed only during showers. Each took turns at exercising, removing her uniform and taking care of personal hygiene, and maintaining duty watches. They spent periods of time in small groups discussing various topics, playing cards, and meditating; twice a day, everyone switched groups so no one had to look at any of the others for too long a period.

Jenn's heart sank when she saw the small quarters she and Cromel would share. They'd use a single bed in shifts, but that wasn't what bothered her. There was barely enough room to breathe, much less move around, and the overhead was so low, that even she had to stoop to get through the hatch. Soon she realized this cramped design was a blessing in disguise; whoever planned this lifeboat had maximized the use of each space and considered the craft's ultimate mission. While the compartments were small, they allowed real privacy.

Jenn soon found that Cromel, who looked hard and tough, was a bright and witty companion, with a great sense of humor. Cromel was one person she never got sick of seeing. Cromel, in turn, found that although Jenn was childlike, she could initiate stimulating discussions. Many of Cromel's jokes went over Jenn's head, but the elf had such a cheerfully wry look on life that it was impossible not to like her.

Once a day, Jenn sang to the women. When she'd first received her lifeboat assignment, Miriam had taken her by the shoulders and said, "Sing to them, Jenn. They'll all be worried and will need the diversion."

Jenn, who still couldn't believe Miriam, was going to do this to her, muttered, "I don't even have a good voice. Besides, they think I'm just a little kid, and won't pay attention to me."

"Maybe not," Miriam answered seriously. "But you'll be in close quarters and in each other's hair most of the time. You must remember, all of them are afraid, since no one knows what will happen next. They'll need your songs to pull them through."

Jenn reluctantly agreed, privately hoping she wouldn't have to go anyway. But now here she was, and the tension lay thick and heavy as a grey fog. Miriam said singing was important, so she had nothing to lose by trying. Besides, Jenn was scared too. She was terrified! Maybe an old and familiar song would make her feel better too.

At first the women weren't impressed by Jenn's small and squeaky voice, but the determined elf continued her solo anyway, finding personal relief in the familiar and nostalgic melodies. After a while, everyone looked forward to her happy songs which reminded them of their own childhoods and of things left behind. Jenn proved to be an asset on a cramped voyage like this one, and morale improved as a result of her determined efforts.

The lifeboat-fighter broke into temporal space 68 days after leaving the Whisper. Cromel checked over her navigational coordinates and decided to make for a yellow star located about 200,000 light years away. In the sub-binary, this would take another 28 hours linear time to traverse.

Everyone agreed with her decision. Fuel was in short supply and they hoped to find a world on which to land and call for help.

The blue-green planet below measured 99,000 kilometers in diameter, and had two large green continents surrounded by vast blue-grey oceans. Dense white clouds permeated the thick atmosphere, covering much of the surface. Using electronic spectrographic equipment, they could determine whether the environment was livable. It proved to be oxygen-rich, with carbon dioxide and the other common gases that formed a breathable atmosphere.

A large, dense moon enveloped in a thin, methane-based atmosphere circled the world. Both bodies were engulfed by intense electromagnetic forces that interfered with the lifeboat's control systems. Unfortunately, the vessel's scant fuel supply was nearly exhausted by the 70 days in the sub-binary. They had to land immediately on the otherwise friendly-looking world below them.

"Everyone strap in," Cromel ordered, and Jenn did so, her heart in her mouth. As far as she could tell, no one aboard knew anything about this blue planet, although Kyung had made some navigational reference to it. She knew they had to land somewhere, but she hoped it would be a familiar place. This place, however, was apparently on the very outer rim of the galaxy, and probably uncharted. As she strapped herself in, she wondered how long it would take the Nashramh to respond to a distress call.

Cromel maneuvered the heavy craft into a low orbit above the planet's equator. Jenn wished she could see what was happening, but she was seated behind a partition which obscured her view of the gridscreen. It frightened her to feel the odd rocking of the vessel as it hit turbulent atmospheric gases. The sluggish controls barely kept her on course.

Cromel fought the controls, which gave her trouble because of intense electromagnetic flux outside the ship. This, in turn, overrode the electrically operated servo-mechanisms. Pains-takingly, Cromel eased the lifeboat down until it struck against the upper atmosphere. It began to skip as it impacted against the light outer gases. The craft was jarred as it came into contact with the gases, which acted as a solid plane, and Cromel had to use much of her precious fuel, reversing the impulse drives.

Jenn and the others bounced around, stiff and alert for trouble. It was a rocky ride, as the lifeboat entered the atmosphere at too steep an angle, causing frictional heat and abrasion from the thickening atmosphere, to tear at her control surfaces. Again, Cromel consumed precious fuel as she attempted to slow the craft and stabilize its glide path. Still, the servo-motors, actuating the control surfaces, were sluggish and the vessel began to dive downward again, nearly out of control.

As the turbulence increased, Jenn thought she would scream; she wondered if this terrible ride was ever going to end. They had to land soon - they just had to! Her pale face mirroring her thoughts, she glanced at the other women near her, and saw that their faces showed the same stress.

Cromel perspired heavily with both strain and tension, her muscles hurt and cramped, and it seemed she'd never get the controls to respond. Finally, she grew desperate and switched to the vessel's emergency manual-hydraulic control system, regaining

a stable rate of descent into the atmosphere. She still had to fight the craft's tendency to dip into a steep dive.

After what seemed to be hours of effort to ease the life-boat down, without allowing atmospheric friction to burn it up, Cromel leveled off at 1,900 meters above the rolling swells of an expansive blue-grey ocean, making for the distant land mass that loomed dead ahead. She applied impulse power sparingly at first, but continued to lose altitude. Finally, after descending to within meters of the ocean's turbulent surface, she increased the impulse power to 50 percent, then, maximum thrust just to keep aloft.

By now, although Cromel was still having difficulties, the ride was less turbulent, and Jenn heaved a sigh of relief. Soon they'd land, and then they'd get help and go home. Wait till she told Miriam about this!

Jenn couldn't see the women's faces sitting near the front of the bridge; they sat close enough to see Cromel's fight with the controls. Their faces were set and solemn and their muscles tense, ready for the worst.

Fighting the controls and the ship's tendency to dip, Cromel was barely able to maintain her altitude of six meters, while far ahead, the dark land mass loomed larger against the darkening sky. The lifeboat quickly approached the clearly visible shore when, without warning, the impulse drives cut out and the craft's nose dropped, causing the vessel to cartwheel wildly into the surging waves.

Cromel was torn out of her pilot's seat, her straps snapping like rubber bands, and she was smashed headlong into and through the control console.

The other women's bodies were torn from their seats and thrown around like rag dolls. The vessel twisted and the metal shrieked in agony as it was subjected to strain and torsion no ship could endure, and within a minute, the craft sank to the rocky ground 11 meters below the rolling surf. Part of her exploded, sending geysers of steam and bubbles to the surface.

Jenn felt, after a moment's panic when the ship crashed into the unyielding waves and cartwheeled, as if her body had been torn apart. Then, she vaguely sensed a warm gust of wind pushing her, and she fancied that she heard a dim, but all engulfing WHUMMMMHHH.

Shocked by a sudden flood of salty water in her mouth and throat, Jenn gasped for breath as she found herself trying desperately to stay on the water's surface. But her environmental uniform, becoming heavy and waterlogged, pulled her under. She felt a harsh burning in her nostrils and throat as she swallowed and breathed in salty water at the same time.

Instinctively she wriggled and squirmed out of the torn uniform that was clinging and heavy, and popped up to the surface like a cork. Then, coughing and gasping in the cold and turbulent surf, she began to tread water as bubbles of steam and escaping gases surged around her, sending her headlong into huge, rolling breaker waves.

Jenn tried to see around her, but the salty water kept stinging her eyes and she was awash in the surging waves. She grew tired, and gradually a lassitude overcame her and lessened the biting cold of the stormy water which tossed her around.

A dense, warm rain pattered and pounded on the inert body half buried in the coarse, granular sand. An outstretched arm with a limp tan hand twitched, and the fingers began to move.

Slowly, Jenn felt herself awakening from unconsciousness, although it was dark and she felt so dim that she wasn't sure if she was awake or not. As her consciousness increased a little, she became aware of that place between waking and sleeping, when one isn't sure if one exists in time and space. Later, Jenn would remember this gradual awakening and creeping awareness, and correlate it to the way she felt the Creator must have first evolved; the first awareness of being without being, then awareness of the self, and finally the awareness and terror of being alone.

After an immeasurable amount of time, Jenn slowly became more aware. First aware that, yes, she was alive, and second, that she would rather go on sleeping.

She hurt. Dull and throbbing pain engulfed her body.

Her face was cradled in the crook of her right arm, and choking on a slowly filling pool of salty water in which her face was half immersed, she gasped for breath and painfully shifted her head away. Then she stopped - her breathing, her thinking - her heart seemed to stop. Everything was black! She could see nothing!

Jenn struggled to a sitting position, trying to disengage herself from the wet, heavy sand which covered her naked legs and hips

like a blanket. Everything was black. She held her hand up in front of her face and couldn't see it.

She was blind!

All around her the rain continued to pitter and pound, and she could hear the hollow slaps as it hit the muffling sand and the smaller plops as it hit her. Rain streamed down her face as if she was standing under a warm shower and her hair, slicked back and matted with sand, dripped heavily.

Gathering her courage, Jenn stood up unsteadily, using both hands to feel around and push herself up. She blinked her eyes a few times, still finding the engulfing blackness which threatened to drown her along with the pouring rain. Suddenly she wished Miriam was here to tell her what to do. She had no idea of where she was or what to do next, and she seriously considered screaming.

The relentless sound of loud, rolling surf approaching to her right, made Jenn decide she had to take some action.

She remembered the terrible crash, the abrupt jarring as air was knocked from her lungs, and the cries as her sisters were torn from their seats. After all they'd endured during their long journey through nowhere this stupid crash had killed them all. Jenn felt betrayed and alone.

She was here and alive, but blind and with no one to help her. Now she was alone on an unknown beach with waves coming closer as the tide came in. She had to get out of here!

Jenn turned slowly, sluggishly, so she was facing away from the loud crashes of the advancing breaker waves, and began walking unsteadily away from them. At first her steps were unsure, since she'd never been so completely in the dark before, except at night in her room, and then she'd either bumped into familiar objects or had known her way around. But here and now she had no idea if she was going to walk into something or step on some poisonous or spiked creature. She didn't even know where she was headed, except that it was away from the water.

Jenn's entire body ached, and while walking, she carefully probed herself with her finger tips, exploring the extent of her wounds, whatever they were.

It seemed that her nose was broken, which accounted for the pain when she breathed through it, and her front teeth were missing. She could also feel sore spots on her upper torso and on

her thighs, but her lower legs, feet, and arms all seemed to have escaped damage. Radiation from the crash must have blinded her, or perhaps something in the ocean water.

The steadily pouring rain washed Jenn's body and hair clean of the coarse, black sand and salt water as she stumbled slowly and silently along. Dimly she felt surprise that the rain was so warm, like a trickling shower.

Jenn, after a time, began to realize just how really alone she felt, and she began talking and mumbling to comfort herself. "Thank God Miriam made me exercise on the *Whisper*," she murmured, her sore muscles beginning to loosen with each step. But still she seemed to be walking forever on the gently rising beach, when the sky began to brighten, just a little, above the thick cloak of clouds.

Jenn stopped short and strained her eyes. Yes, she could see something . . . was it light? With sudden hope, she began walking again as the incoming tide moved the surf ever closer.

After a few minutes it lightened more so that Jenn was sure she was no longer blind. "It was just so dark, so dark!" she mumbled over and over to herself, "Just the dark!"

The cloudy sky brightened to a dull grey, and Jenn could now see a low line of cliffs ahead of her through the persistent drizzle; she quickened her step.

After more than three hours, Jenn finally arrived at the base of a vertical cliff, the rolling surf still licking at her heels. She spied a large, flat stone to her right and made straight for it. Climbing gingerly up the sloped side, she came to rest on its wet surface which was over three meters above the beach.

On impulse, Jenn lapped at a puddle of water on its pockmarked surface, and discovered to her delight that it was fresh. After drinking all she could hold, she sat on the flat rock, the warm rain still pouring over her, and watched the blue-grey sea water as it reached high tide two meters below her. The view was amazing, for the expansive ocean seemed to go on and on. The only land she could see was the flat line of cliffs stretching to her left and right. Her visibility was only good for about 10 or 15 kilometers, since the relentless rain obscured all view. The scene had an odd eeriness and sad loneliness to it.

Jenn decided to lay down in a little ball on the rock to rest and wait for the tide to change, and as she lay there, she tried to think

about what to do next. She was alone, injured, and nearly naked, having only her panties on. What was she to do?

The survival courses she'd taken back at the RAD station had repeated one necessity over and over: make a marker and stay near the wreck. No matter what else you do, make a marker first. Make A Marker!

As the tide receded slowly, Jenn climbed down from the rock and scoured the immediate area for large stones. The upper 20 meters or so of the beach was filled with all sorts of massive stones and large rocks. Now she poked around and came up with some fairly good samples. Then, climbing back up on the flat rock, she painstakingly hauled, one by one, ten of the largest stones she could manage and made an arrow with them, pointing out toward where she thought the wrecked lifeboat was submerged below the low timeline several kilometers away. The instructors insisted that the markers must have ten pieces. Always! They were to be placed in a triangle with four pieces on each side that came to the directional point, three on the back side, and two filling the middle. Jenn remembered it just the way Miriam had told her. Four on two sides and four in the middle make ten:

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Scouring the beach again, Jenn found it was full of seaweed and shellfish. Hungry, she tried to eat the seaweed, but couldn't chew it because of her broken front teeth. Then she used a rock to break open a small oyster-like shellfish, and after squeamishly prying the soft body out, swallowed it whole. She almost threw up, not because of the consistency of the meat, but because she'd just killed a living creature and eaten it! She'd always been a vegetarian, and to her, this was just too much. She wanted to go home! She was doing what she had to do, what the survival classes taught, but she really hated doing it.

She managed another, thinking that at least this wasn't be as bad as the worm tea some instructors suggested if one got lost in a forest and was beginning to panic. And anyway, these oysters or whatever they were couldn't really look at her reproachfully like a Runselnap or something else could, so that was a comfort too. But

still she had to fight her instinct to gag whenever she swallowed one of the slimy creatures, and after four, she gave up. At this rate, she mused to cheer herself up, "I won't be hungry very much."

After finishing her scant meal, Jenn drank more of the fresh water. Then, peering through the thick, misty rain, she scoured the cliffs above her for a small, deep cave that was high enough above the high-tide line, yet easy to get to. After checking out more than a dozen, all of which were fortunately uninhabited, she picked one that was about five meters up and 30 meters to the left of the flat stone with her marker.

As the 'day' wore on, Jenn realized that she was very tired, and she had to find some way to keep dry and warm. Once she'd discovered her little cave, she set about hauling stones of various sizes and as much of the thin silky seaweed as she could up to the enclosure. In the days to come, she would use the stones with clay from the cliff to make a hearth near the cave's entrance and a low barrier all in the entrance to block out the cold sea wind. She also planned to dry the seaweed for both fire material and something to eat. If it cooked well, she might be able to eat small pieces which she could swallow without chewing. The prospect of such a bland diet didn't appeal to her, but it was better than having to kill and eat living creatures. Also, if she could keep a small fire going, she could dry more seaweed for fuel and perhaps even clothing material. Anyway, she had nothing to lose, and she didn't want to go inland for fear of leaving the wreck.

Each day, Jenn labored persistently to secure her little cave, and after nearly choking to death on the smoke from her lovely little hearth, she devised a simple but efficient draft system that gave her both heat and ventilation. The seaweed didn't prove edible, and it made her violently ill when she tried to eat it. However, it did dry quickly and burned slowly, giving her a ready source of heat.

The rain never seemed to stop, and when the ocean was at low tide she could never see it, for it receded so far out and everything was so misty. She found that, although the rain was warm, the sea air was really cold, and she shivered a lot when she went out to find food. So, she experimented by twisting one kind of the dried seaweed into thin strands and weaving them together, like she used to back in her art and crafts classes at Ling Wall. From this, she fashioned crude layers of fabric that served as a soft blanket

which she wrapped around herself and found to be quite warm. Unfortunately, the material couldn't be worn outside, because it got wet from the rain and decomposed. Other than its horribly pungent odor, though, her nice thick blanket was both warm and comfortable.

Although Jenn was stranded alone on this lonely world without knowledge of when she would be rescued, and her life being routinely primitive at best, she simply chose not to think about her isolation at first. To her, the whole affair became something like a great adventure, in which she didn't have to do anything she didn't want to, and could take things at her own pace. At first she slept anytime she wanted, which was often, ate whenever she wanted, with or without washing up first, and exercised only if she felt like it. She talked to herself a lot too, pretending there were other people with her, and this served almost as well as the real thing for a while. It was almost as if she wasn't really stranded alone on this lonely shore, but instead, in her own private fantasy land.

Every day, Jenn busied herself with different projects, one of which was making a doll named Ginger, after the one she had as a child. She fashioned others which she named Miriam and Neferah. She talked to her funny little dolls with seaweed faces, hair, and clothing, and played house with them just as she had when she was a child. In this way she recounted memories of her happy past when she had the security and the love of her friends.

But, as time went on, the games and adventures didn't satisfy her, and although she still played them, Jenn became aware that she was only trying to pass the time and nothing else. She gradually realized that she was, indeed, alone here, and none of the games could replace what she really longed for. Each morning she wakened feeling just a little more tired, a little lonelier until the terrible and painful thoughts of her friends crept unbidden into her conscious mind.

Jenn missed Miriam the most. Not because Miriam knew everything, though; it was something more. Something indefinable she'd sensed when she'd first seen Miriam sitting alone by the pond at Ling Wall's summer camp. Jenn began to cry one morning, now really aware of the extent of her isolation.

"You promised, Miriam, that I wouldn't be alone, ever. You promised. No matter what you think, I've always been your best friend, and I always will be."

Over the months, Jenn thought a good deal about Neftalak as well. Her poor Neftalak, he was so gentle and sensitive, and had fallen victim to the coarse and uncivilized ways of naval men. She still loved him dearly, and hoped he was well, wherever he was.

Jenn's heart nearly broke whenever she thought of her strong and beautiful son and her soft little girl. She wondered if Myrnah was still at Ling Wall, if she was happy, if she would remember her mother. . . .

Jenn tried not to think too much about her lovely family, because it accentuated the terrible loneliness that engulfed her. But, as time passed, they filled her mind and haunted her vivid dreams, like a lovely memory of something intangible that she would never have again. And she was so alone, so tired. . . .

"You promised, Miriam. . . ."

Jenn awoke abruptly, her entire body aching horribly with a strange, gnawing pain. She'd been feeling uncomfortable for several days now, and thought the cold sea air which she was always out in, and blew in through her small window, was giving her a cold. Also she'd been spending more time each day looking out over the misty, rolling ocean, hoping she would see someone coming to look for her.

But now the uneasy feeling was developing into a wrenching pain. Jenn tried to busy herself as she slowly straightened out her cave, fed the fire, and for some reason or other, tidied up the sisterhood marker she'd made at the back of her living area. The marker consisted of intersecting triangles comprised of 13 stones making up each side of each of the triangles, with the total, being 66 stones. In the center was a circle of five stones with a single stone in the middle, thus making a total of 72 stones in all. She made sure that everything was aligned correctly, making the two stars and the dot of the Nashramh shield.

Jenn soon found that all movement was impossible, and after a number of hours she no longer tried cleaning the cave; it was all she could do to keep adding bits of her ever diminishing supply of seaweed to the fire for warmth. Her stock of dried shellfish was sufficient to last for three more days, with her normally small appetite, but she found she couldn't eat. Even drinking water resulted in wrenching agony.

She couldn't sleep, but instead her mind drifted into all sorts of delirious waking dreams in which she saw faces that seemed

familiar and yet horribly alien. Pieces of an old song ending with the words "the smile behind the looking glass", kept jumbling through her mind like a carnival theme; she couldn't focus on anything.

After several hours of lying still, with the fire dying, Jenn saw Miriam kneeling over her. She tried to speak her friend's name, but only a croak came out. Miriam's odd, deep eyes glowed, and she spoke softly. "We will never leave you alone, Jenn. We care for our own."

Jenn closed her eyes, a dull feeling of happiness engulfing her. Miriam was here to take her home! But when she weakly opened her eyes again, Miriam wasn't there, had never been there, and the fire was dying.

On the second day of the terrible pains, as Jenn lay still, wishing she could sleep the pains away, her muscles began to twitch and cramp convulsively, and she found that she was gasping for breath.

After a long while, she lay doubled in a little ball, her large blue eyes staring and glassy, panting weakly.

Then, by some desperate impulse, with every bit of effort she could muster, Jenn silently whispered into the emptiness of her darkened cave.

"Hear O'Daughters of Compassionate Wisdom, the Eternal Our Creator the Eternal is one."

Jenn watched as the ever-rolling ocean ebbed and flowed, waiting for a sign, and thinking . . . always thinking, of her friends, her husband, and her children, as the rain pattered and pounded steadily and the cold gusts of sea wind blew.

And she thought and watched.

Chapter 24

Holiday

The best laid plans can be disrupted by unexpected events and, as often happens, things get scrambled up. . . .

12:00-19 SHABIN 8028-7N5

Gorg Morog waddled through the low surf as her bullsire and cubs frolicked along the wet beach. Soon the tide would be completely out and her family could forage for tidbits among the rocks far beyond the low tide line.

Gorg climbed clumsily up on a large, flat rock to bathe in the soft, pelting rain, and pushed a bunch of stones off the wide surface to make more room for her self. Then she settled down and drowsily looked out to sea as the downpour washed over her coarse fury pelt. It was a good life, a good day, and the weather was lovely.

As the tide receded, Gorg slid off the rock and made for the far-off rolling surf. The beach was alive with shellfish, but the real tidbits lay further out, clinging to deep lying rocks that never saw the windswept surface of the briny ocean. This was where the tangy tidbits could be found.

Gorg grunted with pleasure and anticipation as she slowly waddled down the beach; her bullsire and cubs were having a royally good time out in the surf. They loved to go running, paddling, and rolling out as far into the surf as they could, then be tossed up by the huge waves and rolled back onto the beach. She, herself, remembered the fond sport she had loved as a cub, and she could hear their distant growls and grunts of happy pleasure

as they pursued their games over and over, never tiring of them. After all, that was why they were here; to get tidbits and have a little fun. It was hard enough making their long trek through the dangerous flatlands to reach these expansive beaches along the coast, but this beach was worth it; it had the best tidbits around.

Finally she got down to where the rest of her little family gamboled, and she, too joined in for a few times, although sports tired her after a while. Besides, at least she had the good sense to know when enough was enough, Right, but then, it felt so good, diving and plunging into the smashingly cold and brisk water, being raised so high that it seemed as if she would be able to touch the boiling and churning clouds, then feeling the heady plunge as the rough water rolled her back towards the beach. Oh, it felt so good, so invigorating, that she really hated to stop.

Swimming and rolling across and along the sea bottom among the huge, jutting rocks and boulders, the happy family foraged for spicy tidbits and had a great time of it. They briefly encountered the tarnished and warped hull of some sort of ancient craft, which was richly encrusted with all sorts of spicy tidbits, and, even to Gorg's delight, some very special goodies which she happily schnicked up.

After foraging for several hours out among the deep rocks, Gorg tired of the sport and made for shore. Her bullsire and cubs could gorge themselves into oblivion if they chose, but she just wanted to loll around on the lovely smooth beach and enjoy the warm, soft patter of the rain.

Lounging sleepily near the large, flat rock, Gorg noticed an odd-looking feature on the cliff's face above her. One of the many caves that pockmarked the cliff, appeared to be somewhat different from the rest, and a sense of curiosity was sparked in her drifting mind.

Gorg lazily climbed up the steep incline, her large nose snuffling around for any good scents of possible tidbits, and came nose to rock with a bunch of small, round boulders which blocked the dark hole of the strange cave. Pulling the rocks out of the cave's mouth and sending them tumbling down the steep incline, Gorg eased her furry body into the darkened hole, her large nose snuffling happily at the interesting objects strewn about.

Her sharp eyes examined fragments of a small skeleton curled up on the cave's floor, but she found no tidbits, just a goodie which she schnicked up absentmindedly.

There was nothing of interest here, so Gorg squeezed herself around so that she could leave the cave headfirst, her large, flat tail scattering the small bones and sweeping away a star-like emblem formed by rows of small stones. With everything in the cave left in a state of disarray, Gorg eased her way out of the tight opening and down the steep embankment.

Gorg Morog climbed back up on the flat rock and rolled over on her back, letting the soft rain pelt her exposed tummy. The rain felt so good as she lay there waiting for her bullsire and cubs to tire of their frolicking and to come back ashore.

Gorg dreamily began to purr to herself, the rain pelting her tummy, her soft padded feet outstretched, and she wriggled her toes and drowsed. She was supposed to think about something, but that could wait until tomorrow. This day had been fruitful, with both goodies and tidbits at the same time!

It was a good life.

THE END

POSTSCRIPT

The cataclysmic clash between intergalactic forces along the Starset Galaxy's sixth-arm rim was anticlimactic - or as Miriam noted, "nobody won anything except a stay of execution." This engagement was only an opening skirmish in the scheme of Samael's far-flung conquests. The black enemy retreated to his distant galaxy to regroup and then return under the command of another son of Samael - it is only a matter of time until we again meet his challenge.

Jen died on an obscure planet at the edge of the sixth-arm rim while Telakin, Neftalak, Eaun countless others were killed in action against the enemy. Miriam and Neferah were returned to the RAD station to spend the remainder of their lives working on the reconstruction of our Nashramh navy.

We don't officially know much about Ansharim losses or the disposition of Arden Ardel and other known brothers, but we can surmise that they are facing similar if not the same problems of naval reconstruction as we are.

As to the G.C.C. political and military hierarchy, their foolish treachery and resulting retribution was completely offset by the heroic and loyal efforts of their combined fleets against staggering odds. Our hard feelings towards the perpetrators of their treachery pales when weighed against the overwhelming sacrifices of their billions of rank-and-file warriors who gave everything to protect our Starset Galaxy.

Peace,



Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor
Archivist

Nashramh Class I Scout Destroyer
600 meters long

